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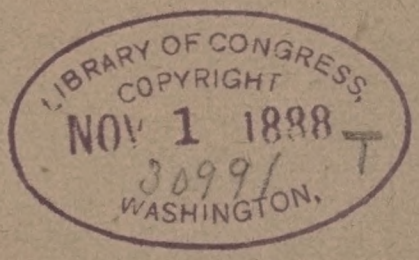
A

GALLANT FIGHT.

BY

MARION HARLAND,

AUTHOR OF "ALONE," ETC.



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A GALLANT FIGHT.

CHAPTER I.

THE "Phelps Place," as everybody in and about Freehold called it, occupied the highest ground in the town. A square brick house was built, before the village expected to be a city, on a round hill rolling gently down to broad river-meadows in front, and more gradually still at back and sides into the level acres and outlying woods of the Phelps farm.

Fifty years afterward a descendant of the first owner heaved the straight roof above the façade into a pediment that imparted a disdainful perk to an edifice already venerable, according to New England reckoning of age. He further increased the importance of the family residence by spreading a portico with Corinthian columns under the eaves on the riverward front. In the pediment was a circular window enclosing a smaller central circle. Leaden lines, radiating outward from the inner round, gave the effect of a Cyclops' eye with a flat pupil and ridged iris, peering over the portico-roof at newer houses, most of them wooden, and blazing with white paint, edging and sidling nearer to the old homestead with each prosperous year to shop-keeper and manufacturer.

The son of the pediment-and-colonnade-builder grew richer than all his fathers, and chiefly from the rise in the value of real estate. The freehold farm, of which the town was the namesake, was cut up into building-lots and criss-crossed by streets, until there remained but the gardens and lawn. The rich red of the bricks was coated with gray paint, the tall colonnade remaining white. A line of kitchens and other offices in the rear suggested the likeness of a brooding Domenica hen, with white face and pert comb.

At least, so declared Mrs. Richard Phelps, wife of the fifth master of the manor, as she sat on the portico one June afternoon.

"The figure came to me at my first visit here, fifteen years ago," she added. "Freehold was the terminus of our wedding trip. The father, and two brothers, older than my husband, were living then, and a maiden aunt kept house for them. I little dreamed that this would ever become my home. Death and change have been fearfully busy in the last ten years."

"Were you born in Baltimore?"

"Yes, and lived there until we removed to Freehold, after my father-in-law's death, eighteen months ago."

"My dear!" the speaker glanced around her in mock concern. "You really must be circumspect! That reminiscent sigh and far-off gaze upon dear old Baltimore would wreck your popularity in Freehold, were any resident but myself within hearing. The Queen of Great Britain and France and Empress of the Indies is not so much to be envied as you, who

have married a Phelps, and are living upon his patrimonial estate in this favored corner of the globe. The only fear among your best friends is, lest in your prosperity you should lose sight of the wholesomely-humiliating fact that you were born somewhere else. Saxe says that people 'once born in Boston, need no second birth.' I verily believe the reason why the doctrine of the necessity of a 'saving change' has become unpopular in our churches is the implication it conveys that any native Freeholder *could* be unregenerate."

Mrs. Reginald Lupton's voice was her primary claim to notice and admiration. It may be characterized as a fleece-lined legato. In pitch, it was contralto, and kept carefully in the middle register. Never hoarse and never shrill, it tempered sibilants and rippled around jutting consonants. The new acquaintance next discovered that she was slim and graceful; thirdly, that there was fascination in the woman, not to be explained by any or all of her definable attractions. Her complexion was often sallow, seldom brilliant, unless when the room was overheated, or she grew animated in talk; her mouth was so large that only perfect teeth and exquisitely curved lips hindered it from being a defect in her face; her chin was rather prominent and her nose a thought too wide at the base. The critic forgot every blemish when she looked at him out of—not *with*—a pair of great red-hazel eyes, soft as antelope's, with dangerous depths in them for susceptible men; eyes that melted and laughed and darkened at her will.

She was the second wife of a rich Freehold manu-

facturer, whose wealth and enterprise had made the town, said neighboring villages that were dwarfed by its growth. He was his wife's senior by a score of years, and had married her, a penniless girl of expensive tastes, ten years before the date at which our story begins. For two generations the Phelpses and Luptons had been neighbors and intimate, and the families as now constituted continued the habit. Mrs. Richard Phelps's only daughter had fallen ill the first winter of their residence in New England, and in the weeks of watching and anxiety attendant upon the attack, Mrs. Lupton had greatly endeared herself to mother and patient. Since then, no day passed without interchange of kindly words and attentions. The grounds of the two houses joined half-way down the side-hill, a lilac hedge forming a nominal boundary-line.

Mrs. Lupton had brought a dainty work-basket up the white gravel walk early this afternoon to sit with her friend on the piazza—the "living-room" of the family from the middle of May until mid-October, whenever the weather was moderately fine.

The clambering wistaria, which, a month before, had hung the spaces between the columns with a pale purple curtain, was diligently putting forth a wealth of leaves, some green, others clear, pale russet, and faint, transparent pink, to break the heat and light at the western end of the portico. Opposite the central entrance of the house, the view of streets embosomed in noble elms, the glancing river, the engirdling blue hills, and of becalmed flotillas of clouds, pearly and snow-white against the June sky,—was unobstructed.

Into this space the two matrons had drawn wicker rocking-chairs and a basket work-stand.

"You are always severe on Freehold and Freeholders," Mrs. Phelps said, with the indulgent smile that often favored her friend's cynical sallies. "Yet both have been good to you."

"Yes?" The tone was calmly interrogative, the eyebrows distinctly dubious. "Perhaps because I ask nothing of town or townspeople. Having always lived in New York until I emigrated at my marriage, I could hardly be content to dwell in a cup-and-saucer, such as Freehold and its valley, were it not that I have money and time for excursions to the real world whenever I am in danger of becoming absolutely asphyxiated. You are mistaken, however, if you fancy that I am popular here. Nobody is, who has a propensity to peep over the edge of the cup, or has imported ways and thoughts from the universe lying outside of the saucer rim. The people who live on the mills over yonder; who finger my husband's subscriptions to public works and charities, eat his dinners and dance at my balls,—envy and hate him in their hearts, because he has more brains and money than they. If any could blacken your name or mine,—tie us up in sacks and make a Bosphorus of their respectable river, to-morrow night, the motion would be carried by acclamation."

She uttered these sentences smilingly, plying her needle with heedful regularity on the cambric she was hem-stitching for her baby's frock.

Mrs. Phelps tried to reply as carelessly:

"You talk nonsense for nonsense's sake! If you

believed one-tenth of what you say, you would bar your doors to keep your neighbors out; would neither visit nor entertain them."

"You see I do both. Reginald's business and moneyed interest are here. To subserve them, I play the gracious châtelaine to people who enjoy coming to my receptions, who accept drives and sailing-parties from me, and enjoy most of all the opportunity these furnish of railing at me behind my back. If my head were no higher than theirs, they would find much in me to like; if it were lower, they would luxuriate in patronage of 'such a nice, deserving creature!' Freehold is a chartered city that doubles her population every ten years, which has yet never outgrown the chrysalis stage of villagehood."

Mrs. Phelps's eyes roved lovingly over the picture enclosed by the vine-draped columns.

"A beautiful chrysalis! I prefer it to the butterfly."

"You might say the same of a silkworm's cocoon. The provincial taint will cling to Freehold should she ever count her citizens by the hundred thousand. The cup-and-saucer conformation must have something to do with it. It is only an exaggerated hamlet, and in a hamlet the unpardonable sin is superiority. You'll find it out to your cost, some day, dear Dame Incredulous. The Phelps name and Phelps wealth will not always protect you. Don't draw into your shell! I am afraid of you when you get behind that quiet, impervious courtesy that listens to all and accepts what it pleases to select. A quarrel

between us over Freehold moralities and amenities would be Much Ado about Less-than-Nothing. Rex tells me Marion intends visiting an Albany friend in a few days. Is it a relative?"

"Only a cousin of her mother, for whom Marion was named. Her only near relative is the brother who lives in Harrisburg."

"The one whose wife is *difficile*, and with whom the poor girl tried to live when her mother's death left her friendless? What a benefactress you have been to her!"

An uneasy flush warmed the other's face.

"Not *that* word, please! Marion Bayard has been like a young sister to me for five years, ever since she and her dear mother removed to the house next to ours in Baltimore. It was not her fault that she could not be happy with her sister-in-law. Roger Bayard married a pretty, vulgar, illiterate girl of low extraction who had not the redeeming trait of good-temper to make her tolerable to a refined, sensitive woman like his sister. I objected strenuously to her going to him, when the Baltimore home was given up, two years ago. When she came to me six months later, broken in health and spirits, I would not let her return. She has her own modest fortune, as you know, and Roger is very grateful to me for insisting upon her residence with us. He appreciates the incompatibility of her nature and habits and those of his wife, poor fellow! But there is no benefaction on my part. She is a blessing in our home."

"Mr. Richard Phelps hardly agrees with you there. Why doesn't he like your best friend?"

Assertion and query were offered with the dulcet deliberativeness of Mrs. Lupton's preceding remarks. The dark eyes rested calmly on needle and hemstitch ; her head was inclined slightly to the left.

The flush was a burn on Mrs. Phelps's cheek. A sparkle more like anger than indignation flashed toward the speaker. She was seldom sharp in speech, but her accent had an edge now.

"I have never said that he does *not* like her."

"He told me so, on Christmas Day, when her engagement to Rex was announced. As the boy's stepmother I had a right to know how his betrothed was esteemed in her home. Mr. Phelps acknowledged that, while he did justice to Miss Bayard's beauty and accomplishments, he hardly shared in your enthusiastic admiration of her. He added, however, that she had many noble qualities, and that he could not but be grateful to her for the happiness she had given *you*. Do you know—" a quizzical gleam stealing from beneath her thick lashes,—"I fancy that he is just a tiny bit jealous of your paragon? A husband so devoted is not likely to brook a rival near the throne."

Mrs. Phelps laughed—the clear, vibrant laughter of a happy girl in the relief of a surprise that also amuses her.

"Richard, jealous! It is not in him to distrust anybody he likes. He would have to change nature and name—cease to be Richard Phelps and my husband before he could doubt *me!*"

"Do you never disagree?"

"Hardly disagree. It is an ugly word. When our

opinions differ, we discuss—as I would weigh pros and cons within myself. It would be hard to quarrel with one whose temper is so sweet and generous as his."

"We are both married to the most charming of their sex," Mrs. Lupton observed complacently. "And, thus far, neither of us has cause for jealousy on our side—that we know of! That *is* phenomenal!"

"It is more phenomenal that a true woman, sensible, and sound at heart as you, should prattle pessimism. You would stake your life upon your husband's continued fidelity, as I would my soul's salvation on that of mine. I lose patience with you, sometimes!"

"I ought to be piqued because you imply that you have more confidence in your lord's fealty than I in the fidelity of mine. 'Life' and 'soul's salvation' are not interchangeable terms. Ah, well! I confess that my Reginald is no better than the average spouse. The price of every woman's supremacy is continual tact. So long as I can keep my charming man in a good humor with himself and me,—beguile him into the belief that I am clever, pretty, popular, *and* without other individuality besides that I share with him,—I may defy competition. When he praises other women, I outdo him in laudations of them; when men admire me, I laugh, with him, in private, at their foibles and admiration. While I can not say that we never 'disagree,' I am thankful to be able to assert that we go comfortably together in the hymeneal harness; more amicably, perhaps, than more

spirited steeds who whine and foam their bits if separated for an hour."

"*Don't*, dear!" Mrs. Phelps laid down her work to lay a pleading hand upon her friend's arm. "Some things are too sacred for jesting. You love your husbond fondly and entirely, and he worships you. It is a sacrilege to speak of management and artifice in this connection. Nothing he *could* do would shake your affection or absolve you from your allegiance to him. Leave such 'profane and foolish babblings' to wives who were bought and sold like other merchandise."

The face turned to the serious speaker was dimpling with roguishness.

"It is worth while to play the pessimist for the sake of driving you to yet loftier heights of optimism. I don't comprehend how you can breathe so far above the earth. I must break off all talk with you—earnest or playful—for the present. I see a seamstress who calls by appointment, going in at my gate. Good-bye, sweet saint! I shall probably keep Reginald in a good humor this evening by bringing him over to see you."

She ran lightly down the slope through the gap in the hedge; in another minute, waved her hand back to her late companion from her own door.

Mrs. Phelps had arisen and gone as far as the edge of the portico with her guest. Instead of resuming her chair, she put her sewing together in the work-basket, set it back against the wall, and began walking up and down the long colonnade. The amused smile that had followed Mrs. Lupton home gradually

faded into thoughtfulness that was all untouched by gloom.

As—if our story is to have a heroine,—it is this woman, we do well to look at her critically as she paces the firm boards trodden by five generations of her husband's name and kin.

She was, at this time, thirty-six years of age,—six months older than her husband,—a trifle over medium height, dark-haired and gray-eyed. Color and figure were good, her voice was clear, full and admirably modulated. The Freeholders had pronounced the bride Richard Phelps brought to visit his birthplace, fifteen years before, "nice-looking and real sociable." They said now that she "looked right down handsome sometimes." She had been carefully educated, and, since her marriage, had read much and with excellent judgment. Without other accomplishments than a fair degree of skill in musical rendering, and a deft turn at versification, she was a genuine admirer of talent and generous in the expression of the same. She was an agreeable, rather than a brilliant talker, yet one with whom most people talked their best. If to set others at their ease, and make them in love with their own thus-developed selves, be a rarer gift than self-display, Mrs. Phelps possessed it without suspecting the endowment. That she was really interested in nearly everybody she met, and disliked few, was, to her apprehensions, sufficient reason why they should appear well and seek her society. She was so used to being liked that her sense of humor took the sting out of surprise when she encountered disfavor. Of enmity, she never thought. Why should

any human creature wish her harm? Her whole nature, physical and moral, was sane ; her sympathies were ready and abundant.

Maternity and wifehood were with her a passion. Home loves were the Ark of the Covenant, brooded over by angels, guarded by faith and loyalty from careless or profane hand. Life had been a fair tabernacle to her for these thirty-six years. First in the heart of a husband who honored as much as he loved her ; adored by her twin-children, a boy and a girl, just fourteen years old ; blessed with wealth, social position and friends,—there was reason no less than gratitude in the fervent exclamation that stole softly from her lips, by-and-by, " Heaven never made a happier woman than I am to-day ! "

She had paused in the wide central space from which the vines were pruned away. The setting sun had changed the blue hills to royal purple ; the cloud-flotilla, under a full press of rose-colored sails, was gliding eastward through deeps of faint, yet ineffable blue. The river was molten gold, shot with flame ; a surgeless sea of amber light rolled over the elm-tops upon roofs and streets and lawns. The gazer's face, slightly uplifted to the witchery of rose, azure and topaz cloud effects, caught the blush of youth from their reflection ; her hands, lightly clasped, hung in front of her ; the soft folds of her white woollen gown fell still and straight to her feet.

A young man approaching along the path Mrs. Lupton had taken, stepped upon the turf edging it that the crunch of the gravel might not betray him. As he drew nearer, he stood still, waiting to be dis-

covered. He was tall, — over six feet, — height exaggerated by a very slender figure. Allowing for the fair hair and complexion that always detract from a man's real age, he could not have been more than twenty-three, and, although not actually ungainly had the look of feeling his length of body and limb. His eyes were brown and, just now, gleamed with fun and expectation ; his features were clean-cut, the mouth lightly shaded by a blonde moustache.

A pair of robins dropped noisily from the lower boughs of an elm to the shaven lawn, and Mrs. Phelps's eyes, following them, lighted on the smiling visage, not five feet away.

"Rex Lupton ! How you startled me ! Did you flutter down with the robins ? Have you ever seen so many of the pretty, red-waistcoated rascals anywhere else as in this town ?"

She had given, or he had taken both her hands in greeting ; their meeting looks were cordially affectionate.

"The kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them !" she continued, motioning towards the gorgeous panorama of river, sky and land. "A perfect afternoon for a ride ? Our dear girl was sadly disappointed that you could not go. Even after what you said last night, she did not give up hope until your note at noon put the matter beyond doubt. She was more than half-inclined to postpone the excursion, but the children protested so piteously that, when their father offered his services as escort, she consented to go."

The young man's step-mother would have guessed

from the wavering of the honest eyes and a slight quickening of articulation on the latter clause of the sentence, that wifely influence had been privily used to bring about the proffer of escort-service. Mr. Rex Lupton was too thoroughly in love to suspect that any man in his senses would not be enraptured at the opportunity of sunning himself for two hours in his divinity's presence.

"I would not have had her lose the glorious afternoon on any account," he said in pleasant, refined intonations. "She understands perfectly that everything—even the delight of attending her—must sometimes give way to business."

"Do you know"—abruptly—"I think you are the most patient heroic man in Christendom? I dare say when you found it would be impossible to get out of the trammels, to-day, you neither swore, nor frowned, or so much as remonstrated with your father—only said, 'Very well, sir!' and settled down to office-drudgery."

"If you knew my father as well as I do, you would appreciate the folly of 'remonstrating' when he issues an order. His subordinates are drilled in true Roman fashion. When he says 'Go!' or 'Stay!' we never think of appeal."

"Did you tell him why you desired leave of absence?"

"I simply asked if it would be convenient, I believe I said 'possible'—for me to be away from the works this afternoon. I put the question cautiously, for, as I told Marion last night, I knew we would be very busy. 'Quite impossible!' he said. That was

an end of all colloquy. There never is 'controversy'."

Mrs. Phelps took his offered arm and they began to walk the porch, as she had done, awhile ago.

"Have you always yielded this unquestioning obedience to parental authority?"

A passing spasm wrung and hardened the young fellow's face.

"Almost always!" he said in a low voice. "I resisted once."

"Don't tell me of it! I beg your pardon."

"I could tell nobody else. It would humble me to have Marion know of it. I cower like a cur, or rage inwardly like a devil when I recall it. It helps, not hurts me to speak even of that time to you. You are not old enough to be my mother, but no other living woman has ever come so near to taking the place she left empty when I was a delicate child of ten. She had been dead a year when I answered my father disrespectfully one morning at breakfast. How I happened to do it is a mystery to me now. I think I was not well and felt cross. He knocked me out of my chair by the time the words left my mouth."

The listener stifled an ejaculation, but her face was less discreet in the expression of horrified pity.

"The fall stunned me. My father's voice, telling me to 'Get up!' recalled my senses. I tried to stand, but was obliged to drop into a chair. He ordered me to ask his pardon, and when I sat, dumb and, he thought, dogged, he locked me up in my room and went off to his office. I stayed in my chamber for three days, fed on bread and water and flogged daily

before I would submit. In the end, I begged my father's pardon, and paid further penalty for my obstinacy in a fit of illness that kept me in bed for a fortnight."

Mrs. Phelps's eyes were full of tears.

"O you poor, *poor* boy! If your mother had lived there would have been no need of the terrible lesson. Yet your father is very indulgent to the younger children."

"He wisely leaves the management of them to their mother. She has wonderful executive ability. A will as strong as his usually goes with a hard hand. My 'quiet ways' try his patience, but if I were more like him neither the same office nor the same town would hold us both.

"Forgive my egotism! I forget how to be reserved when with you. You have opened a new world to me. I do not know myself for the shy, apathetic drudge who met you on this very spot, a year and six months ago. Do you recollect it? You and Marion were taking a brisk 'constitutional' on the piazza. It was a fine frosty morning, and Isabel had asked me to bring a message to you. You held out your hand before I could give my name or errand—such a strong, friendly hand! I noticed that, although you had no gloves on, your fingers were warm. Marion stood a few steps away while you said a kindly sentence of welcome; then you presented me. She was wrapped in a furred mantle, with some miracle of snowiness and fluffiness about her head. Great heavens! what a difference in my life that meeting and that minute have made!"

The suppressed passion in accent and face were best answered by silence. Mrs. Phelps had a rare genius for listening. Rex Lupton was confident of her tender sympathy while she uttered not a word, and the weight of her hand on his arm remained unchanged. They made two turns of the long piazza before she spoke again.

"I told you, on first hearing of your engagement, how glad I was for my dearest friend in her gain of your heart. I am gladder of it this minute. You will cherish and reverence her as she should be loved and reverenced. And she will make up to you for all you have lost and missed in your previous life. We had a long talk of this in her room last night when the rest of the world was asleep. She grows hourly into fuller appreciation of your character and aims. Her heart is fixed, however the brilliant sallies and varying moods some people attribute to waywardness, but which are to me one of her peculiar charms, might awaken doubts as to her stability of purpose. You have won a rich prize, Rex."

"If I do not know *that*, I am blind and ungrateful. I am not what is commonly known as 'a religious man,' but as the knowledge of what she is becomes more apparent in our closer companionship, the sense of my unworthiness, the wonder that she should have listened favorably to my suit, deepen, until in the very dust of humility I am ready to cry out, 'Lord, be merciful to me a sinner!'"

His voice sank to a thrilling whisper; he bowed his head and raised his hat with the last words.

Before Mrs. Phelps could reply, a pair of ponies

scampered up the carriage-drive that curved over the lawn from the street below. The riders were Paul and Salome Phelps. Warm, sweet radiance flowed over the mother's face, her heart leaped from her eyes in welcome. The girl threw herself from the saddle before her brother could dismount, or Rex hasten down the steps to assist her, and flicked her pony lightly with her whip, a signal he obeyed by galloping off to the stable. Brother and sister ran up, side by side, to kiss their mother. Both were handsome children and near the same height, but strikingly dissimilar in features and complexion.

Salome's dark, intense face was her mother's in miniature. Paul had borrowed chestnut curls and blue eyes from his father.

"My darlings, what will the staid Freeholders say to such racing?" exclaimed Mrs. Phelps. "Where are Cousin Marion and papa?"

"Miles behind us," Salome panted joyously. "We have not seen them in an hour."

"You see," struck in Paul, "the roads are perfect, and I think the beautiful weather got into the ponies. There was no such thing as holding them."

Their voices were the same in quality and inflection, and both were the father's.

"Always excuses for Gilpinism," smiled the mother. "Run off now, monkeys, and get ready for tea."

As the merry din of words and feet passed through hall and upstairs, she sighed, involuntarily pressing her hand to her chest.

"Fulness of happiness is kith, if not kin, to heartache. When I leave this full, beautiful mortal life, I charge

you to see that 'Blessed among women' is carved on my tomb. If the Giver of all good were, this hour, to ask me what mercy or boon He could add to my treasures, I have no answer ready. Some lives are all nights of weeping; mine has been one long morning of joy. To you," with a bright, loving glance, "sunrise has just come!"

"It is passing lovely," said Rex in a musing undertone, lips and eyes moved by a smile that was marvelously sweet.

Few called him handsome at three and twenty. His figure was too spare; his bearing had, in general society, a suspicion of *gaucherie*, begotten of shyness, which the Freehold cliques set down to haughtiness. Mrs. Phelps had adopted him into her motherly heart at their earliest interview, and contended stoutly for his personal comeliness. According to the gossips she had wrought enthusiastically in the match-making consummated in the lately announced engagement. Her influence was reputed to be boundless with her ward, the proud, capricious beauty, feared by the beaux and disliked by the belles of the provincial town, and nothing but Rex Lupton's declared suit to Miss Bayard withheld harpy fingers from clawing together and tainting equally his reputation and that of the imported mistress of the big house on the hill.

The excess of the feminine element in Freehold society heaped up, and kept at fermentation heat, the elements of scandal, as a vast mushroom-bed where uncouth fungi throve rankly.

Preserved by the catholicon of native purity and abundant happiness from misgivings of moral miasma,

Mr. Phelps continued to walk her portico, arm in arm with her adopted "boy," in full view of the sidewalks thronged with business men, operatives of both sexes wending their way from commercial and manufacturing "down-town" to the suburbs, while pleasure vehicles of divers sorts, streaming in from the beautiful country drives that were one of the vaunted attractions of the city as a residence, lent an aspect of gay prosperity to the elm-shaded thoroughfare.

Rex was first to espy the flutter of a dark blue riding habit amid wheels and horses. The promenaders stood by one of the central pillars of the piazza, smilingly expectant when the equestrians entered the lower gate and rode slowly up the hill, their forms drawn in strong relief on the crest, against the rose saffron of the West.

Miss Bayard accepted the assistance of her betrothed in alighting, and, attended by him, mounted the steps, holding up her train with both gloved hands. She was a high-bred looking girl, with a classically oval face, a beautiful haughty mouth, pale-brown hair, with golden reflections where it rippled, and wide gray-blue eyes darkened by long lashes. Taller by a head than her hostess, she stooped to brush her forehead with her lips in a hasty kiss that yet satisfied the recipient. Marion was chary of demonstrations in the sight of others, passionately fond in their confidential interviews. The matron saw moreover that her favorite was annoyed or more weary than she would confess. She had a masculine contempt for anything like physical weakness in herself. She was pale now, for her, and shadows lurked in the eloquent

eyes. The brow, usually so clear and fine, was knotted with pain or irritation as she turned abruptly from Rex and asked if "the children reached home safely."

Her quick-witted, warm-hearted confidante grasped the situation at once. The girl was piqued and chagrined at Rex's inability to keep his engagement, and not reluctant to have him know it, a matter that would right itself as soon as he had an opportunity to explain the circumstances. To afford him this chance was, for the present, the thought uppermost in Mrs. Phelps's mind. She hurried Marion off to change her riding-habit as she had Salome.

"As quickly as you can, dear. Rex will take supper with us. He has been waiting for you this half hour. If you do not spend an unconscionable time at your toilet, you can enjoy the finale of the sunset together."

Young Lupton escorted his betrothed to the foot of the staircase at the back of the hall, and Mrs. Phelps turned to look for her husband. He had not left his saddle, seeing Rex ready to wait on Miss Bayard, and as soon as she was on the ground, had ridden off in the direction of the stables. The wife stepped from the porch upon the macadamized drive, and strolled around to the rear of the house to meet him.

The presage of falling dews was in the air in the cooler scent of the roses bedded in the space dividing the strip of lawn running along the back porch and the wing from the kitchen garden. They were in the flush of summer bloom, and the mistress, whose especial pride they were, halted here and there to regale her senses with fragrance and color. Across the river, warm, dim shades were filling up the hollows of the

hills, dusky purple that would, when the red light should leave the horizon clouds, wrap the earth in the June twilight which only makes way for the dawn. A dissipated bumble-bee was sucking the last drop of syrup from a honeysuckle goblet as Mrs. Phelps went by the trellis; the pair of robins she had seen flew up to their nest laden with a slug apiece; half a dozen sparrows scratched and fought for the scattered grain on the stones of the stable quadrangle beyond the gardens.

Her husband was there. While still separated from him by a clump of shrubbery she heard his voice, raised in a key he seldom used.

"I don't care if he is farrier to the Emperor of Russia and the King of the Cannibal Islands! He shall never touch a horse of mine again. Take her to-morrow morning to somebody else, if Freehold can support more than one blacksmith's shop. If not, report to me and I will send her to Boston or New York."

"My love," said Mrs. Phelps in sympathetic anxiety, "what has happened? Nothing to Bess, I hope?"

In speaking she went up to the handsome bay whose hoof the groom was holding, and stroked her sleek neck.

"She has limped all the afternoon. That villain of a farrier drove a nail into her foot yesterday when he shod her. I shall be agreeably surprised if she is not lamed for life."

"I am sorry! Poor Bess! Has the shoe been taken off?"

"I have given all necessary orders." To the groom, "You will see that they are obeyed! Did you come to call me to supper?"

In addressing her again the waning light of the sun setting struck right across his face through an opening in the trees. His was a magnificent personal presence. Tall, grandly proportioned, with the walk and mien of a king, he was a man to be noticed in a crowd had his head been less noble, his face less engaging. Close chestnut curls covered the one, the expression of the other was intellectual and winning. Children and strangers "took" to him; his friends were the comrades of years, some of a life-time; servants slaved cheerfully for him; in whatever social concourse he found himself, he was a magnet. Born to popularity as sparks fly upward and rain-drops fall, he had wrought out his destiny with graceful ease.

He looked so pale and distraught now, shrank aside so visibly from the level rays that revealed this, that his wife felt a strange chill at heart, while she refrained from verbal comment. Her hand stole up to his shoulder; lingered there for an instant, and slid down his sleeve while she talked.

"No, dear, Marion is changing her dress, and, should she be ready before we are, Rex is waiting on the porch for her. Wouldn't you like to saunter through the grounds for a few minutes? I cannot bring myself to leave the sunset yet. It must have been superb from Bluff Hill. Did you come home that way?"

"Yes—no! We came around through the valley

road," stepping forward with her at his side. "Isn't Rex Lupton going home to supper?"

Mrs. Phelps looked up in surprise. "Why, no, dear. I invited him to stay. I thought he ought to have Marion's society for the whole evening after the disappointment of the afternoon. You don't mind his being here, do you?"

"No more than usual. It is one of the inevitable annoyances incident to the existing state of affairs, I suppose. Only—a man does long to have his house and family to himself once in a while."

The wife was silent. He had intimated the same thing several times within a few months past. From inference, rather than from assertion, she had gathered the painful truth that Marion's residence under their roof was, at times, less welcome to him than formerly. To-day Mrs. Lupton had told her in so many words that he did not like her friend, yet soothed the smart of the information in the next breath by repeating his expression of gratification that Marion's society brought happiness to his wife. It is the very young, or the incorrigibly unphilosophical, who insist that things equal to the same shall be equal to one another, and fall out with their best friends because they are not mutually attracted. Mrs. Phelps was neither young nor irrational, and she hid her hurt.

They wandered out of the rose-garden down one and up another of the gravelled paths intersecting the shorn turf with pleasing irregularity. At each turn they paused to look toward the darkening undulations of the hills behind which the sun fires burned

low, but floridly still. One of the pair may have noted the fluctuating shades and glows; the other gazed with eyes that saw not. Her heart labored heavily under vague apprehension of evil done, or approaching. A sickening suspicion associated her husband's strange moroseness with his prejudice against Marion. Something had occurred during the ride to augment it, perhaps to heighten it into positive aversion to one whom she loved as her eldest child.

Richard dropped her hand, held loosely by his arm, suddenly and without apology to take a match-safe and cigar from his pocket, and scraped a lucifer on his heel. It spluttered spitefully, and went out; the second spit bluely, and the scarlet head flew off upon his wife's sleeve.

"Take care!" said he harshly, "you will be on fire *next*."

A silly, soft-hearted woman would have asked, snivelingly, what misdemeanor she had already committed that the next should be so savagely predicted. This matron, accused by implication, filliped the cinder from her gown and laughed lightly.

"Woolen doesn't take fire so easily! Your heel is damp with dew, I suppose. Won't they light if you strike them on the safe?"

For reply he snapped to the case, thrust it back into his pocket, and stalked on, his hands behind him, the unkindled cigar between his teeth.

"It passes my wits to see what you and your friend Miss Bayard find to admire in your other *protegé*, that cub Lupton, junior!" he said finally.

"I shouldn't choose his father as my bosom companion, but he is, at least, a *man* with brains and will of his own. The son is a priggish puppy, a stiff, disagreeable cad, an attenuated milksop—and you women are making him more insufferable by pampering him into conceit of his fascinations. You will excuse me if I take a walk instead of supping with him to-night."

"You are not well, darling. Why not go up to your room and lie down? We will have a quiet evening there together."

She faced him in the walk, laid her hands on his breast, and raised eyes full of loving anxiety without a thought of personal pain, to those which looked over her head into gloomy vacancy. His lips were narrow and tense, his brows contracted. The motion that dislodged her hands from their hold was like a strong shudder. He put her aside imperiously.

"I am not to be schooled or wheedled even by so accomplished a diplomatist as yourself. I shall take supper at the Club."

He strode across the turf straight down the hill, reaching the fence at the base with a few hasty bounds. The woman left thus rudely alone stood, rooted to the ground, watching his fierce progress. He would surely return, or look back from the fence. He vaulted over it and went on. His wrath, aroused by whatever cause, must evaporate before he reached the first corner. He was quick-tempered, but he could never hold fire for five minutes at a time. After he vanished in the now silent vista of gardens, cottages and embosoming elms, she loitered on the

hillside, still expectant. If he did not turn back this would be their first quarrel. What had she done—or failed to do or say—to provoke him? In a quarrel there must be reciprocity—contest.

She sat down upon a rustic bench to think and watch and suffer. The purple dusks from below were rising to meet the slowly falling curtain of evening; every cottage had its home-light in the window; star peeped out after star in the sky, the wide, wide vault that from the Phelps place shut down close all around the world; a church bell began to ring so far down town that the solemn admonition of the chime was mellowed into tender entreaty.

"Mamma! Mamma!" shouted the twins, seeking her in colonnade and garden. With an effort, for her feet clung to the earth, she ascended the slope and met them on the drive her husband and friend had ridden over an hour ago.

"Here I am, dear children!" her voice as clear and more even than theirs. "I walked down the hill with papa. He has an engagement out to tea this evening."

CHAPTER II.

REX LUPTON was traversing the piazza alone when Mrs. Phelps returned to the house.

"I sent up a while ago to ask if Marion were ill or over-fatigued," said he with involuntary ruefulness, "she returned word by Salome that she would be down directly."

"The door was locked, and Cousin Marion did not open it when she answered me." Salome followed her mother into the hall to say privately, "I did not tell Mr. Rex that, for fear it might make him more uneasy."

"That was right and prudent, daughter; I will go up myself."

While she spoke a white form appeared on the landing of the stairs. Superbly tall, with filmy draperies that enveloped and waved about her like mountain-mists, she arrested herself for an instant on the topmost step at sight of mother and daughter, then trod steadily downward. The blaze of the hall chandelier gave the picture to Rex Lupton, framed by the open folding-doors of the hall. The crimson carpeting of the staircase behind her, the oaken wainscot on one side, the massive balustrade on the other, made a recess of richly-tinted shadow out of which an incarnate goddess floated earthward. Pique at her tardiness, uneasiness as to the cause, impa-

tience—everything that was not consistent with impassioned idolatry—fled at the sight.

He came forward to meet her with a smile that told no more of the ordeal of the past hour than does the sunrise of the clouds dispersed by its approach.

"Your ride has given you a matchless complexion, Marion, love," Mrs. Phelps said lightly; "I hope an appetite as well!"

She passed into the supper room, Paul on one side, Salome on the other. Their arms, interlinked about her waist, stayed the faint heart. Each face had her fond kiss, and the children separated to their places, Paul to her left, his sister on her right at the table, before the lovers entered.

Marion Bayard was startlingly beautiful this evening. The exquisite texture and fairness of her skin suggested the epithet "cream-laid." The creamy ivory was flushed on each cheek as with the reflection of a damask rose petal; her eyes shone and danced; the lofty repose of feature that earned for her, with unprized acquaintances, the reputation of hauteur, was exchanged for sportive gayety almost childlike in spontaneity and *abandon*. She chatted saucily with Rex, made common cause with the children in their fun, and bore herself toward their mother with mingled deference and fondness, exceedingly lovely and altogether indescribable.

Mrs. Phelps played the inconsiderable part left to her of amused auditor bravely, with no lessening of secret depression. Richard's empty chair; the lack in the hum of talk of his resonant tones; the recol-

lection of their parting on the hillside—kept her spirits beneath the reach of enlivening influences.

Salome waited to accompany her to the piazza at the conclusion of the meal. The spiritual accord of the two was wonderful in quality and completeness. As the girl clasped her hands within her mother's arm on their way out, she laid her cheek down upon it.

"Precious Motherlie!"

"My sweet one!"

That was all, but both knew what was meant—the need of comfort and the full gift of the same.

One end of the piazza, and that the most densely shaded, was by tacit agreement given up to the lovers. A bamboo lounging-chair and an upright one stood there now inviting juxtaposition, but the white-robed goddess, a shimmering wraith in the fragrant twilight, was flitting to and fro, followed rather than attended by her lover.

"I am restless—flighty—what women with nerves call 'nervously excited,' to-night," she affirmed, still with a singular air of unsettled joyousness about her; "I feel the quickening of wings at my heels. I *wish* you could waltz, Rex! You must learn if you would make me perfectly happy. My Lady, will you play while Paul and I take one little turn?"

"I will," interposed Salome, before her mother could reply.

Marion called to her as she moved toward the drawing-room:

"We will open the shutters and dance out here, *à la* Oberon and Titania!"

The long casements opened to the floor. Salome, playing in the half-light shed into the great drawing-room from the hall chandelier, heard the beat and skim of rhythmic feet on the hard, smooth boards. Rex, who had retreated to the back of Mrs. Phelps's chair, watched with her the dark light forms whirling from shadow into shadow across the lake of radiance spread over the floor through the folding-doors. As Marion complained, he did not waltz. The self-consciousness, bred by his father's criticism of his overgrowth and bashfulness, restrained him from exhibitions of skill and grace habitual with most "society men." He had scruples as to women's waltzing—or so he thought. Since these were not shared by the proud, pure princess he served he was reserved as to their existence, but he never looked on when she was spun around the ball-room in another man's embrace. Jealousy of Paul would be ridiculous. He admitted generously that the little fellow took his part creditably, keeping step so accurately that Marion gave him a toss and shake not taught by masters in conclusion, and a kiss as a reward of proficiency.

"You are quite out of breath, my gallant Oberon," she said, seeing him lean against the wall for steadiness, "while I am like a just started humming-top, not half spun out. O Rex, you crystallized, galvanized, dehumanized *Punctilio!* Why were you not taught in your youth—if you ever *were* young—my private opinion is you are the nineteenth-century fulfillment of the prophecy that a child shall be born a hundred years old—but why didn't somebody tell

you a couple of centuries ago that dancing without waltzing is a dead form? How well Salome plays that Strauss waltz! Doesn't it put a single symptom of musical madness into your feet? Pshaw! I forgot there is no music in your heels—or in your soul!"

"Will you accept me as an unworthy substitute?" said full, manly tones, and Richard Phelps stepped out of the curtaining darkness into the illuminated area of which she was the centre.

His wife uttered a cry of glad surprise; Rex, never ready at repartee, gave a little laugh of relief.

"Do! do! Cousin Marion!" cried Paul in a transport. "Nobody else waltzes like papa!"

Dutiful Salome, all unaware of the change of actors, played on with spirit, reconciled to task and solitude so long as she stood between her mother and boredom;—the mother whose voice did not ring quite true this evening, and whose eyes were tired.

Marion yielded herself without a word to the hand and arm that took possession of her. It might be a sensitive imagination, or super-acuteness of perception, which brought to Mrs. Phelps a fleeting fancy that the girl had recoiled at the sound of Richard's voice. It was blown away instantly by the rush of delight in her husband's mode of making amends for his temporary irritation. He always atoned generously for his few and brief outbreaks of temper. While he feigned to gratify Marion's whim, he meant, in reality, to prove to her—his wife—that he was ashamed and sorry for his insinuated disapproval of her dearest friend and for his slurs upon Rex.

Whole-souled and royal, he seized upon this favoring pretext of setting himself right with all, improved the opportunity with gracious tact.

Paul's vaunt of his father's waltzing was not extravagant. Always agile and strong, he sustained and directed his partner with grace that made their motion, seen in alternate gleam and dimness, like visible music. The trio of observers stood close up against the latticed extremity of the portico to give them more room. Neither of the waltzers spoke until, at the twentieth turn, they halted at the other, and unenclosed, end of the porch. Then Mr. Phelps asked quietly, evidently in response to some sign or motion from his partner :

"Are you tired at last? How nobly you kept it up! You have magnificent staying-power."

"Fie! fie! a sporting phrase to describe such an exquisite sonnet of motion!"

Again the interruption was projected from the encompassing darkness, the speaker advancing before they could be startled.

"It is only ourselves, dear friends!" she continued, "we have been admiring the *al fresco* dance for some minutes. Where are you, Rex? What is your rôle while Mr. Phelps plays Young Lochinvar?"

Mr. Lupton was bowing over the hand of his daughter-in-law elect, having paid his respects to the lady of the house.

"My dear Miss Bayard! I must remind you, in the interests of the Lupton clan, of the imprudence of sitting or standing in the outer air while you are heated by dancing. Since substitutes are the order

of the day, will you accept my arm and allow me to lead you into the parlor ?"

Rex was last in the short procession that followed the pair. Indeed he did not belong to it except by courtesy, having loitered without purposelessly for several minutes, strolling off the step upon the drive, and, standing on the hill-brow, seemingly to gaze down upon the town and up at the stars. Soft darkness enfolded the quick earth caressingly ; the scented air that had, all day long, held the sunshine with tremulous joy, still pulsed in a languid ecstacy of memory. If Marion would come to him here, and alone, the hour and the world would be perfect in bliss and beauty. He sighed heavily in retracing his step to the now illuminated drawing-room.

He was always ill at ease in his father's society. The bitter-suave demeanor of his eldest-born puzzled many as much as it vexed Mrs. Phelps. That Rex was a disappointment to his ambition, and so nearly antipodal to his own dominant, audacious personality, as to awaken his contempt, hardly accounted for the systematic intolerance with which the parent viewed his son's every action and word. Even the extreme courtesy of his bearing to the beautiful woman who had surprised everybody by accepting the hand of his heir, savored occasionally of mockery in over-acted adulation. She met it now, as always, with perfect temper and breeding. Rex, pausing in the doorway, beheld them in mid-promenade of the long stretch of carpeted floor, chatting together vivaciously.

Reginald Lupton, Senior, would have been a master among men anywhere. In Freehold he was a king—

and looked it. Richard Phelps, patrician from crown to heel, had not a more distinguished air than this son of a mechanic who had begun life as an operative in the extensive mills bequeathed by him to his only child. The single trace of the self-made man left in the polished citizen of the world was perceptible in the directness with which his masterful will drove onward. The brawn of the plebeian forced to toil for daily bread was in the arm that clove his descendant's way to success. Incorruptible integrity and a relentless aim are a terrible combination when human creatures are the puppets worked by him in whom these are vested. No one dared charge dishonest doing upon the magnate-monopolist of the cup-and-saucer town ; nobody expected mercy when his interest suggested severity.

His eyes, in shape and color like his son's, were of a bright, hard brown ; his hair and full beard were slightly grizzled ; the flat back and well-lifted head were martial ; his articulation was refined, yet incisive.

"Her cheeks have not toned down to regulation tint yet," he said, with playful gallantry, when Mrs. Phelps invited them to be seated. "This is a sanitary measure for her ! With me, it is a horticultural study of the transformation of a rose into a lily !"

"Oh, dear !" sighed Mrs. Lupton, her wonderful eyes on Richard, who had taken a chair next to hers. "Why can't the young men of the period say things like that? When your generation and Reginald's pass away, the art will be lost. Why not establish a School of Courtly Speech, in which compliment and

bon mot and repartee shall be taught, instead of multiplying academies of philosophy and learning?"

"Mr. Lupton might add the endowment of such an one to his list of colossal enterprises," returned the host. "With himself as president, you as illustrative or clinical professor, and—" slightly raising his voice until it reached Rex, who leaned against the door-frame with folded arms listening while Mrs. Phelps talked to him—"with Mr. Reginald Lupton, Junior, as resident tutor."

Everybody heard him, and looked inquiry. Marion and her escort paused so close to the speaker that the voluminous folds of her white gown swept his knee. He arose instinctively as she confronted him. A swift cloud of displeasure or dislike swept over her face; his eyes froze and glittered. He replied as if she had questioned, although her curling lip had not formed a syllable:

"We were preparing the prospectus of a Conservatory of Speech and Manners, wherein shall be taught all sorts of pretty ways of saying *un*pretty things: the latest inventions in glossy equivocations shall be patented and applied. Over and above all, the art of having always ready the right speech at the right time will be made a specialty. Mrs. Lupton is to be professor of the last-named fine art; it goes without saying that you are to have a chair; Mr. Lupton will be elected president by acclamation, and our friend Rex is to be resident tutor and coach."

Marion's head was drawn back like the crest of

an eagle ready to strike his prey; the dull gleam of fire was in her eyes; her skin was as colorless as a magnolia-petal.

"If it were a matter of learning how to speak—and to *live*—the truth—" she retorted, rounding and giving each word with a calm emphasis—"and nothing but the truth;—of keeping the heart unsullied, of showing by example, rather than speech, that honor and existence are never to be parted in a true man—*here* you have University, President and Professors—all in one!"

She had left the father's side to take her stand by the son. With the last ringing utterance, flung out, as it were, with a little shake of the head and sudden impetus,—she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him—then glanced away like a flash of white light.

Astonished and intoxicated, Rex stood transfixed, not offering to return the embrace he would have died to win.

"A mummy of the prehistoric period!" sneered the father in a rapid "aside" to his wife, who drowned it by clapping her hands softly, Salome and Paul following suit.

The sound broke the spell. The fugitive could hardly have gained the stair-head when her lover darted in pursuit.

"Daphne and Apollo!"

Mr. Lupton said it with a well-bred laugh that yet made Mrs. Phelps's ears tingle.

"Or a modern—and amended—version of Actæon and Diana," said Mr. Phelps dryly. "Madeline,

love, may we light our cigars in here, or would it be more *convenable* to adjourn to the library?"

"Smoke wherever you choose, my dear husband! You do not need to be told that. I confess I don't know why we left the porch, where cigars are always admissible."

"On account of my husband's rheumatism," said Mrs. Lupton with a cool little gurgle of amusement. "Solicitude for Marion's health was a neat pretext. That is an illustration of my husband's manner of carrying his point. He is the best mixture of Napoleonic resolution and Talleyrandian address ever compounded by a chemical Creator. Nobody resists him except myself, who on this occasion have made up my mind not to budge from this easy-chair until I rise for 'Good-night.' But you must not have smoking in your 'best room,' my dear Mrs. Phelps! The Freeholders sport none of the small vices themselves and are venomously uncharitable towards foreigners who use cigars and wine. I would go to the stake for and with you, but I cannot be your backer should any of the denizens call while the burnt sacrifice is being offered."

"Come, Lupton!" Mr. Phelps moved towards the door, "we will avert the curse if we can, even if we send ourselves to Coventry in the effort."

The little mocker sent a shaft after them:

"Gallant heroes! in your orisons and incense remember us who give you the chance to jabber politics and business without interruption!"

"What shams we are, and what shams we pursue!"

she continued, unrolling a gay strip she was crocheting for a cradle-afghan.

She never paid a neighborly, informal call without bringing some piece of work,—a graceful trifle that made impressive, not lessened, the effect of speech and glance. The two women, left by their exiled spouses, drew their chairs nearer together when the children went off to bed. The bracket-lights over their heads cast about them a circle of coziness in the vast room, which was a parallellogram. It was upheld midway at the sides by two fluted pillars three feet from the walls,—a legacy from him whom Mrs. Phelps called "Richard's columnar ancestor." Similar pillars divided front from back hall, and the door-posts were the same in miniature. Altogether, the house, entered from the front, had a sort of Fingal's Cave effect, not dispelled by the level distances of the state drawing-room, where corner shadows stole even in daylight, to the middle of the mingling subdued shades of sea-green and umber of the carpet, powdered with pink sprays like coral-branches seen through rippling water.

The French windows, the candelabra, the soft delicateness of upholstery and carpets, the Oriental rugs and sheeny hangings, were—like Richard Phelps's wife—imported and an innovation.

"What shams we are, and what shams we pursue!" moralized Mrs. Phelps's crony with an air of meaning nothing in particular and everything in general, linking one absent-minded word tunefully to another, while she pulled her work straight and caught the gold crochet-hook in a worsted mesh. Then—gather-

ing shining teeth, curving brows and eye-gleam, into her sudden smile:

"What does the little melodrama mean?"

"Melodrama!"

"Only that and nothing more—*perhaps*—dear Lady Simplicity! There was less passion in embrace and kiss than a woman with warm blood and not cool lymph in her veins would bestow upon her third husband's step-mother. Marion is not given to 'gush.' Having just settled in my inner consciousness why she promised to marry my solemn step-son, I object to the re-adjustment of my ideas. The elocutionary effort, and the demonstration that stunned poor Rex into idiocy, may have been lava-bubbles through the crust. What started the fires? What has she been doing this evening? Who has been talking or writing to her—or looking at her, to-day?"

Mrs. Phelps met the gaze and treble-barbed query with composure. Her face, when in repose, was serious to pensiveness. Every line in it was grave now; her accent, if not rebukeful, was devoid of sympathy with what she heard.

"As you know, Marion has been with us all day. The lines of her character and motives are singularly fine and simple, although on a grander scale than those of ordinary women. Her apparent caprices never trouble me. The impulse that made her champion Rex so warmly was altogether natural. She imagined—erroneously, of course—that his peculiarities were held up to ridicule, and she flamed out in his defence. What could be less complex?"

"Nothing, assuredly; except yourself. Your Emersonian talk of grand scales and simple lines is not fine-drawn fustian when one looks at, and listens to, you. I fancy I smell flowering thyme and buckwheat in your presence, a whiff from the wholesome days when women basted hems by a thread and heard the children say their catechism Sunday evenings. It was a nice, safe, easy-going life, that of our mob-capped grand-dames, a hundred and fifty years ago!"

She changed the subject at a right angle, with no pretence of adroitness. Having dismissed a topic after this peremptory fashion, she could never be lured back to renewed consideration of it.

Her interlocutor, uneasy, and, she owned to herself, unconscionably irritated by *equivoque* and innuendo, could neither reopen the discussion nor resist the charm of Mrs. Lupton's sprightly gossip of people, books, and current events. The sharp "tang" left on the tongue by her local hits and subtle analyzation of character and deed was, to Mrs. Phelps, all that hindered her best neighbor from being entirely delightful, a friend to be cherished for a lifetime. To her direct, "simple" mind, a degree of disloyalty was attached to habitual disparagement of the place and people among whom one dwelt by choice or necessity. She wanted to make the best of everything, sought to discern Freehold virtues, not foibles. It required an effort of will, she had discovered before this, to rid the mind of the aforesaid slight, but adherent "tang"; to stand fast by her resolution to let her judgment be without prejudice, her approval without reservation—beginning with her present visitor.

Yet when Richard had walked home with the Luptons to get a book from their library, and she went back to the drawing-room to shut the piano, she caught herself repeating,—

> "'Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,
> And without sneering others teach to sneer!'

"It is a pity! The vase is very lovely, the ointment would be so sweet but for that one noisome little gnat!"

A movement in the hall attracted her attention, and, glancing up, she beheld Rex in the doorway.

"Ah! come in!" her countenance clearing at once. "Has Marion gone upstairs?"

"She has not come down. I have not seen her since she left this room."

"No? I thought you overtook her!"

"I heard her lock her door as I ran up the stairs. Of course I could not follow her after that."

"I don't see why not!"

His sad, heavy eyes opened in amazement.

"I could not presume so far, especially when—" He stopped there.

"Rex Lupton!" in whimsical vexation. "I don't know whether to call you a prudish prig, or a tactless angel! Even a Freehold-born Mrs. Grundy—(there! I am catching the trick, too; more shame to me!)—I mean, who *could* find fault with such a modest, natural act as going to the chamber-door of the girl you are to marry, knocking politely, and asking through the panels—still respectfully—when and where you could see her? Your scruples would make Cælebs envious;

you out-Grandison Grandison! Did you expect her to come without being called? I should have no respect for a woman who would—to quote your own expressive words—'especially *when!*' As for *Marion!* But go on. I should like to hear what you did next."

"I went to the library and wrote a few lines which I sent up by Salome, as she passed the door on her way to bed!"

"Ah!" leniently. "What answer did you get?"

"None!"

He said it in dreary wretchedness; his young face so haggard that her large, deep heart ached all the way down.

"She neither came nor wrote? All this time?"

"She neither came nor wrote, all this time. I waited in 'our corner' of the piazza. I was there skulking like a thief, when my father and Isabel went home. Mr. Phelps was with them, so I came to ask your advice."

"Stay here! I will go up and see Marion! 'Not disturb her! not trouble myself!' My dear boy! I have not lived thirty-six years in this world of crossed purposes and not learned that the straight road is always the shortest, and generally the safest. The idea of letting you two young things be miserable all night, when a dozen plain, motherly sentences will right everything!"

She went, with her light, firm step, up the stair, and along passages to Marion's room, and knocked. The first tap on the panels told her that the door was locked. A second and a third elicited no reply.

The serious mouth was resolute, but not stern, as she spoke, her lips close to the door that Rex might not hear her in the night-silence of the halls.

"Marion, dear, it is I! You are not asleep. I must speak to you at once. I shall stand here until you open the door."

Key and knob were turned. Marion stood within the threshold, in her evening-dress. The counterpane was smooth; a shaded lamp burned on a stand; a high-backed chair by the window showed where she had sat out the hours during which her betrothed had waited for her below.

"My child!" without prelude, "Rex would like to say 'Good-night' to you. He expected you to join him on the porch, as usual, but we know you had some good cause for disappointing him. He is alone in the drawing-room. Richard went home with the Luptons. I am on my way to the children's rooms, now. Go directly down—won't you?"

She was gone before the other collected her thoughts for refusal or consent.

Left to herself, Marion put her hand to her forehead; bewildered or irresolute. She was very pale; hot tears that had not fallen had swollen and flushed her eyelids. As she turned towards the staircase, she drew in a long, fluttering breath between her teeth.

"I can do nothing else! nothing! nothing!"

Rex moved forward to meet her with gentle self-respect, unlike the agitated mien he had showed to Mrs. Phelps.

"You were very good to come down," he said; "the ride and dance together have wearied you sadly,

I am afraid. I hope you will have a restful night, and be quite yourself in the morning."

He held her hands, not offering to draw her closer; his quiet, pleasant voice did not vibrate to the mad heat and fling of the repressed heart against the bar he had laid across it; his smile was a trifle constrained, but kind and sweet. She fixed wondering eyes upon him under which his own did not change. There was metal of proof here which was generally mistaken for ice.

"'Quite myself!' You *hope* that! If you could see me as I am, you would not say it!"

The accent of pain was so sharp, that one might have said he had struck her; her fingers wrung his hard.

"I am a wretched thing, Rex—not worth your picking up. But such as I am—and I may never be a whit better—I do belong to you! *Say* that I do, please!"

"Belong to me!"

Tenderness that was passion purified by adoration, glorifying eyes and smile, he took her to his heart; kissed brow, lips and cheeks until she trembled in his arms like a captive bird.

"My love! My queen! My *wife!*"

She was too faint to stand when he released her, but she smiled at his ejaculation of alarm and self-reproach.

"You have taken my breath away! I shall get it again directly!" she panted from the chair in which he had placed her, and, as he caught up his hat to fan her, she laughed hysterically:

"Who would have thought to see you play the impulsive bear! That stiff construction doesn't bring me a puff of air! If that is your object in waving it frantically you may be interested in the fact. Somebody is coming!—We will be decorous again!"

The ring of boot-heels on the stone steps announced the return of the master of the house, Glancing into the drawing-room in passing, he saw Marion raise herself hastily to her feet by grasping her lover's arm, then lay her white hand on his shoulder.

"It must be late, dear!" Mr. Phelps caught one sentence, and lost the rest. "Thank you for sending for me, and for your patience and love. I seem never to have understood until now how unutterably good and sweet you are. Now, you must go. I will try to sleep, and be ever and ever so much nicer than myself to-morrow."

Mr. Phelps was closing the library shutters, and, his back being to the door, he did not hear her go by on her way to bed. She did not stay her feet, or address him. Her bitter murmur on the stairs went with the scorn of her haughty lip:

"It is amazing how rude a 'perfect gentleman' can be when out of temper! An illiterate boor might wait for a guest's exit, before beginning to shut up the house with such aggressive slamming!"

She did not seek Mrs. Phelps, and the mentor had too much tact to come near her. The cloud that had spoiled the evening for, at least, four of the party had rolled by, leaving peace like that of the June night upon the heart of wife and of lover.

Rex Lupton bared his head under the stars, and

stood for a motionless minute before entering his father's door. His lips never prayed; his heart, often, although it may be doubted if he was conscious of the act. He did not "say his prayers," only felt them,—sometimes in agony, seldomer, as now, in joy that knew no form of human utterance.

Mrs. Phelps divined from her husband's bound up the stairs what manner of face he would bring into her presence. It was handsome, sunshiny, and, as she met his eyes, eloquent with answering affection. He put his arm about her, binding in the rippling hair that fell below her waist over the white dressing-gown, and kissed her with a bridegroom's fervor.

"I was sorry to have so little of your society this evening, my darling, but Lupton is considering a proposition that he will allow himself to be nominated as Congressman from our district, and wanted to talk it over with me. The obstacle in his way is the difficulty of leaving his business. If his son were altogether competent to carry forward affairs without his actual presence, his way would be clear, he says."

It was said with judicial impersonality to which Rex's champion could take no exception. Richard went on, laughingly:

"I advised him to make his wife Regent. What an ambitious little diplomatist she is! Warm-hearted, too, with all her affectation of flippant pessimism. But I cannot expect any woman to be the peer of my glorious wife!"

CHAPTER III.

Then, if ever, come perfect days,
Then, Heaven tries the earth if it be in tune,
And over it softly her warm ear lays."

MARION BAYARD gave the familiar lines with loving stress on each word.

"Who but Lowell would have said '*warm* ear'? And what else could so happily describe the brooding hush,—the smiling, listening, *cuddling*—of the sky on an afternoon like this? It reminds one of Mendelsohn's music—and of *you*, Madonna!"

"You are a silly child, and I an elderly woman," said her companion in loving chiding. "Because I am nearing my dotage, is perhaps the reason I love you the better for your delicious and egregious flattery. Hark! the concert is beginning!"

They sat in a low-hung pony-phaeton, drawn up in the middle of the road. On one side arose a hill wooded to the crest with hemlocks, on the other, a thick belt of deciduous trees hid the valley and river. Behind them were boskiness and greenery; before them the Land of Beulah, and the Delectable Hills, looking toward the Celestial City set in the clouds. Battlements of jasper, sapphire, sardonyx, beryl, jacinth, amethyst—a gate which was a single pearl, shining highways, the end of which was glory intolerable to bodily gaze,—were framed in the

arched opening through which the sunshine fell to their horse's feet. Here and there, the straight bole of a hemlock had golden scales on the westward side, and splashes of molten gold had dripped between the boughs upon the brown mantle laid over the breast of the hill.

The friends often came to this spot at this hour to hear the vespers of the thrushes. It was a back-country road leading into the woods, rocky in some places, in others deep with sand,—and therefore, little travelled. The shy, rich-throated birds had much to say to one another in the summer sunsets. Recitative, response and choral sounded from depth to depth of foliage,—dulcet, rapturous, plaintive, as with human heart-break; wooing, as with divine comfort,—until the solemn woods held their breath and the "warm ear" of heaven bent nearer to listen.

Mrs. Phelps ended a long pause, speaking softly, not to flutter the warblers:

> "'That's the wise thrush! He sings each song twice over,
> Lest you should think he never could recapture
> The first fine, careless rapture.'

"So says Browning! I think he never could have heard our sunset choristers. Their 'raptures' are earnest to passion." And, yet more slowly and musingly, "You will always be with me here, Marion; although I should not see you, I should the spiritual presence and sympathy if you were in our world and I in another. This will be our oratory—yours and mine. I thank the Father every hour for His gift to me of you, my bonny song-bird!"

Laying her hand on that which held the reins, she felt it grasped convulsively, then raised to the girl's lips and pressed there, while hot, fast tears fell upon it.

"My darling!" remonstrated the motherly voice, "you must not grieve over to-morrow's parting. You will be back with us before the thrushes leave off their thanksgivings for the new summer-time. We shall miss you sadly, of course, but three weeks will soon pass."

Marion's head sank upon her friend's shoulder.

"I ought to go! I must not stay!" she sobbed. "But my heart is very near to breaking! When I come back—if I ever do—"

"Marion Bayard! How *dare* you! What has got into your foolish little head?"

"I may die, you know—get smashed up on the train,—or fall in love and elope with an Albany millionaire!"

She sat erect and wiped her eyes, laughing nervously, as in an abrupt reaction of feeling.

"The vicissitudes of life are many—heart-changes many-er—the vagaries of girls *despicable* beyond finding out. My self-contempt grows huger every minute."

"A poor compliment to Rex and myself."

'Why will you insistently couple the two names?" said Marion, petulantly. "Or—there may be profound, unconscious meaning in the habit you have taken up. It is a pity you are not young enough and single enough to marry him. You are worthy of him, which I will never be!"

"What of my poor Richard in that case? Would there be an exchange of partners all around?"

She was sorry for her levity on seeing the beautiful face alter darkly. There was a gesture of angry disgust, a painful flush, then a grayish pallor settled about mouth and eyes.

"Mr. Phelps and I would make one another miserable if forced to live together in *any* relation. He would say the same if pressed to tell the truth. Forgive me, Madonna, but you must not say such things!"

She tightened the reins and the pony jogged down the shaded road toward the flaming West. Mrs. Phelps, shocked and distressed, could not at once put her regrets into words. This was so much worse than she had feared. Where is the wife who ever really resented her husband's jealousy of the *woman* she loves? Richard was too just and kind of heart to let groundless prejudice affect his treatment of a homeless orphan. But Marion's sudden heat looked as if she had divined it. If she had, her intense, sensitive nature had exaggerated it beyond measure. It was for Richard's wife and Marion's friend to set the wrong right. I have called her tactful, but her tact was rarely shaded or sublimed into diplomacy. She could hold her peace advisedly, and give perilous topics a wide berth. When a crooked thing was to be rectified, a wicked thing rebuked, she went at it by the most direct route.

They were in the open country at the bottom of the hill, still driving towards the city in the clouds, but out of hearing of the thrushes, when she spoke again:

"You hurt me just now, dear, without meaning it. Of course I would not have another woman *love* my husband as I do"—laughing a little at the absurdity—"but, it would be a genuine grief to me if you and he were not good friends. I have fancied once or twice, lately, that your relations are less cordial than they used to be—why, I cannot guess. This I am sure of, however; if he has displeased you it was unintentional. He admires and respects you too sincerely,—he loves me too well to wound or offend the creature dearest to me, next to him and the children. You must take my word for this."

Marion was mute; her eyes, fixed on the horse's ears, were tearless, but dulled into vacancy; her face was set doggedly, color and softness had gone out of it utterly. The evening was very still; the muffled rhythm of hoofs on the soft, moist road and the subdued crush of wheels were the only sounds in the wide, golden spaces they were traversing. Commons, covered with sparse grasses, lay about them; the forested heights had fallen abruptly into a plain, beyond which flowed the river. On the thither bank of this, the town arose gradually from the water's edge, beautiful for situation, fairest of American homes as seen now, in green-and-amber glows and purple deeps of shade. Mrs. Phelps remembered that June forever aa a month of sunsets,—this, the goodliest of all. That any one should be sad amid such beauty, with Heaven so near and Nature so prodigal in soothing influences, was inconceivable.

She pushed her parallels further. Plainly, thorough

frankness was the only system of tactics indicated by sense and feeling.

"I have been conscious of a jarring chord in the music of our home-life for a week,—" she pursued, gently,—"detected the first false note on the day of the horseback excursion, the afternoon when Rex could not go with you. I appreciate the delicacy that has led you and Richard to keep silence on the subject of whatever disagreement then took place between you, through fear of paining me. I do not ask for particulars now. Whatever may have been the cause or manner of your misunderstanding, you felt that I must not be called upon to take sides with either. I am right—am I not?"

"Yes."

Marion wet her lips with her tongue before articulating the monosyllable.

"I do not want to know how my husband has offended you. I only assert solemnly, that he could not do it intentionally, and that he is more willing to ask forgiveness for his blunder than you are to receive his apology. I know him so well, you see. He was a mere boy when we were married,—a pair of love-mad, imprudent children. We deserve no credit that our union has been so happy. Richard has his foibles. He would not be so patient with my faults if he had not, but his soul and heart are crystal-clear to me. He is a frank, honorable, fine-natured gentleman, who is incapable of a mean action or motive. Marion! my sweet child! my very own friend! I *cannot* have you disapprove of Richard! He is my other self, and you have so grown into

my heart that you cannot help belonging, in part, to him!"

One of the fashionable achievements of clumsy discomfort, yclept a village-cart, dashed up alongside of the phaeton while the last word was on the speaker's tongue. It had come on with such speed that when the driver checked the high-stepping cob to speak to her friends, the vehicle rocked on the two heavy wheels like a tub in a chopping sea. The occupants were Mrs. Lupton and her eldest child, a pretty boy of nine.

"What a perfect evening!" cried the charioteer, holding in the eager horse until the cords stood out sharply in her wrists. "Have you noticed the sunset, and wonderful cloud effects? Gerald and I have been admiring them this half-hour. Isn't it exasperating, Marion, that poor Rex's plan for escorting you to-morrow should have fallen through, after all? You don't mean that you have not heard of it! The telegram came at noon, and I supposed, naturally, that he had communicated promptly with you. I forgot that love itself can not make *him* hasty. Yes! Mr. Lupton must be in Boston to-night to address a political meeting of business men, and another in Lowell to-morrow evening. Rex can not possibly be spared from the service of Moloch before next week—if then. You'll wait for him, of course!"

The sinews in the slight, strong wrists relaxed, the high-stepper was off like a meteor, churning up the damp, sandy soil, as he flew.

Surprised and disappointed, Mrs. Phelps turned to her companion and saw eyes full of angry fire, cheeks

on which the intense color of the horizon seemed to have concentrated in two burning spots.

"I hate that woman!" she muttered, behind set teeth. "I *hate* her! I HATE her! I could have killed her when she said that last thing. 'Wait!' not the tenth part of an hour! I shall go to-morrow in the face of father, son, and step-mother! Don't speak to me—please! I have a familiar devil you know, who is mighty and will prevail at times. This is his hour and he will not be reasoned with. I don't want him to rend *you!*"

Rex was on the portico when the rapid, silent homeward drive was finished. He was always pale, and the grave smile with which he saluted them betrayed so little of what he must be feeling that Mrs. Phelps was actually vexed. He helped her out of the phaeton, then held up his hand to Marion, who had not stirred.

"I shall drive around to the stables," she said, shortly and sullenly.

He stepped into the phaeton, took the reins from her before she was aware of his intention, lifted his hat archly to Mrs. Phelps, and drove down the hill in the direction of the town.

His advocate, left on the steps, laughed gleefully.

"If he only knew it, a *coup d'état* like that, which forestalls denial, wins upon a woman's respect much sooner than an indefinite course of courteous compliance with her whims," she was thinking as Salome ran out to her with a telegram.

"For papa, motherlie!"

To Marion her friend was "My Lady" or "Ma-

donna;" Paul, always, and Salome in the presence of others than the family, called her "mamma." "Motherlie" was a name of the child's own invention, used in loving and confidential moods. To Rex Lupton's apprehension, it suited her so much better than any other that he had ventured to apply it once or twice in their talks. It touched a place in her heart that not even her husband's pet-titles reached. She stooped now to kiss the lips that said it.

"Isn't papa at home, my sweet?"

"No, motherlie. He went out on horseback an hour ago. And the telegraph-boy is waiting for an answer."

The lovers were absent but half an hour. Mrs. Phelps met them with a beaming countenance and the air of one who has agreeable tidings to communicate.

"Do you hold to your resolution of going to-morrow?" she asked of Marion.

"Yes." The tone was not that in which she had asserted it before. She looked somewhat languid, but very gentle and lovely. "My cousin expects me, and Rex thinks it doubtful if he can get off at all within a fortnight."

Rex seconded her, holding her hand while they talked. Lovers never "minded" Mrs. Phelps.

"She is right—as usual. Yet I do not like to have her travel alone—for obvious reasons," stealing a proud smile at the fair face. "I hope to find an escort between this and to-morrow noon."

"*Voilà!*" cried the hostess triumphantly, showing a yellow envelope, until now held behind her back.

Marion moved nearer to her lover who opened the

paper, so close that her cheek touched his sleeve while they read the despatch together.

Albany, June 20, 187—

Richard Phelps :

Important evidence obtained in Clerk's Office. Can you come on to-morrow?

E. Cartright.

"My darling!"

The epithet escaped Rex involuntarily, as the girl slipped from the top-step on which they stood, and would have fallen backward but for his arm.

Startled and pallid, she clung to him.

"I feel sick and jarred," she said, brokenly. "It is odd that such a little shock should set my head to whirling. Give me your arm upstairs, Rex! I must lie down until I am better."

In his anxiety, he supported her into her chamber, and stood by while Mrs. Phelps arranged pillows and administered hartshorn. Marion had, in truth, nearly fainted, and the chaperone had not the resolution to send the poor fellow away until the girl's color and voice were again natural. The first use she made of the latter was to say jestingly :

"If I am to indulge in these pranks often, I would do well to stay at home altogether. Unless my head leaves off reeling, I shall certainly *not* go to-morrow."

Mrs. Phelps had convictions on the same subject, divulged confidentially to Rex, below-stairs.

"Marion needs change of air and scene," she pronounced. "You men, no matter how considerate and

sensible you are, can not enter into the vagaries of an engaged woman's nerves. She has acted lately like one laboring under high pressure of excitement—a wild bird, caught and caged. Don't stiffen up so defensively! You wouldn't love her so well if she were a decorous, commonplace Griselda! This telegram is the sword that will cut the Gordian knot. Richard is one of the lawyers in the Blake will case, you know, and sent Mr. Cartright to Albany, Monday, to look up evidence. Of course, he must go in person, now, and will be more than happy to take charge of our dear girl, who is, as you intimated, quite too handsome, besides being too precious, to be allowed to travel alone. It is only a second-best plan, but since your escort is out of the question, I can imagine nothing more satisfactory. I hear Richard's voice! I will speak to him at once!"

She hastened around to the stables, telegram in hand. Richard had ridden in at the back way, and was just swinging himself from the saddle as she appeared. His color was clear and fresh with exercise; the warm blue eyes that always deepened and softened at sight of her were so full of light, he looked so young and noble in the affluence of vitality and happiness, that the wife forgot her errand for one ecstatic moment.

"How grand, and good, and handsome—how *magnificent* you are," she cried, nestling in the arm cast about her.

"What a madly mistaken matron *you* are!" laughing down at her earnest face. "I was sadly chagrined when I came up early from the office to invite you to

drive, at finding that you had run off with somebody else."

"You know I should have enjoyed nothing more! But I had promised to go with Marion, and it is her last day with us. By the way, dearest, Rex can not escort her to-morrow after all—and here is a telegram from Mr. Cartright, summoning you to Albany. You wouldn't mind taking charge of her—would you?"

The timid inflection of the query was not without a tone of alarm at the change in his manner and countenance. He almost snatched the paper, glanced at the lines as at a nest of cockatrices, then tore the despatch into shreds and flung them from him.

"I wish you would not open my business letters, Madeline. A lawyer's wife might understand the impropriety of such meddling. This could have waited until I got back. I hope you have not mentioned it to any one?"

"I am sorry, Richard, but I have!" said the wife, bravely. "Marion was so cast down because Rex could not go with her, and he so concerned lest she might have to travel alone, that I was indiscreet in my haste to relieve them. Then, too, Rex was about to look for another escort. If you can not go, he can find one yet. Please don't be vexed, dear! I acted injudiciously, but I meant it for the best."

"Everybody means to act for the best," said Richard, automatically and dreamily. "Forgive my abruptness, but you have placed me in a most disagreeable position. It is not convenient for me to get away by to-morrow noon, nor—excuse me for

saying it, but you force me to be blunt — is the charming *fiancée* the companion I would have chosen for the journey. Nor—again!—am I the cavalier she would have selected as the alternate of Reginald Lupton, Jr. It isn't flattering to a man's vanity"— with a dry laugh—" to play second-fiddle in any case. If your fair friend were consulted she would not have me in her orchestra at any price."

Mrs. Phelps rarely shed tears, but they choked her when she would have replied. The blow was unexpected and cruel. Parting hastily from her husband at a path that led to the side-door, she flew down this and up the back staircase to her chamber, stumbling blindly over the threshhold, and locked herself in.

" I seem to do nothing but blunder, now-a-days!" she sobbed, walking back and forth, chafing her fingers, and trying—for awhile, vainly—to beat back the childish fit of temper and wounded feeling. " Richard has not said so many sharp, unjust words to me in ten years before as in the last ten days. I could be almost thankful that poor Marion is going away for a few weeks. The troubled waters may settle and clear when we are left to ourselves."

Mothers and housewives are usually forced to nurse hurt sensibilities and splenetic humors in very dark closets and attic " cubbies" of the soul, if they indulge in the costly pets. The " white glare that beats upon a throne" finds a modest reflection in the lime-light of domestic manufacture focussed upon the presiding genius of every home. Dinner must be ordered, beds made, rooms dusted, linen sorted, and

stockings darned, though hearts ossify and brains soften under the weight of calamity. In the face of papa's faultfinding with herself and his unjust rulings of family law, mamma must uphold his infallibility to his children. At the expense of personal prestige, she defends him to a larger constituency, makes all the world liars, herself included, that his crest may pass unhacked. The truth, and the consequences to her own conscience of the denial of it, are faced in sleepless midnights when "*Peccavi!*" is whispered in the ear of offended Heaven, but in the sight of her fellow-mortals she does not blench. Her oratory is a movable tabernacle, set up in store-room corners, beside cradles and cots, and never safe from prying eyes and careless feet.

The tea-hour drew on apace. Richard would soon be up to get ready for the meal. His touch had never found his wife's door fast. She set it wide open, after bathing her eyes and saying a prayer of two sentences on her knees at the bedside. At the sound of his tread in the hall,—the tread which she had often said, fondly, always brought new life into the house and a gladder beat to her heart,—she turned herself from the window with a spray of honeysuckle she had leaned out to pick. Her eyes were dry, her cheeks cool, a smile of welcome stirred her lips.

"Your *boutonnière* is ready," she said brightly, and when he had changed his coat, washed his hands, and brushed the chestnut curls ruffled by the heat, she went up to him and pinned it on his lapel.

He kissed her for thanks.

"I was a brute, just now, my sweet one, and you are a merciful angel. I should think you would be glad to be rid of me and my fiendish humors for a day or two."

"Treason!" She laid a gentle palm upon his mouth. "The king can do no wrong. I must be more prudent in action, less hasty in speech, hereafter."

He completed the *amende honorable* at the tea-table (he never did anything by halves), by speaking with natural off-handedness of his departure for Albany by the noon train on the morrow, and telling Marion that he would be happy to take charge of her and her luggage. She was less gracious, yet not discourteous.

"You are very kind, Mr. Phelps!" looking directly and calmly at him. "I shall not decide until the morning whether or not it will be advisable for me to go. I have lost heart somewhat in the expedition, but I may feel differently to-morrow."

"Of course, I do not presume to interfere with that decision. My poor services are at your command should you require them."

Mrs. Phelps did not wonder that the rejoinder was more formal than the offered civility, nor that her husband settled a keen, inquisitive glance upon Marion's down-dropped lids, after making it. Had the conjecture been tenable, she might have thought that he distrusted and was watching Rex's affianced wife. The mysterious variance between the two so dear to her reminded her of the sound produced by a pin Salome once dropped among the piano-strings. It

was a dissonant thrill, rather than discord, but it set teeth on edge and passed, like an electric eel-let, from joint to joint of the spine. Again, she said inly, that Marion's going would give her an opportunity to pull the warped web straight, and eliminate the disturbing intruder. The misunderstanding was, thus far, only like a crack in the varnish of the lute. Daily and hourly jarring might widen it into a rift past mending. She must ignore seam and jar, yet essay with tender, tactful touches to close the one and harmonize the other.

Mrs. Lupton dropped in, in the evening, to bewail her temporary widowhood and project delightfully ridiculous philippics at local politics and politicians. Richard listened, encouraged and applauded for half an hour, then arose with manifest reluctance, and excused himself for withdrawing to write business letters in the library.

"It goes without saying how much rather I would stay out here with you two!" he added, passing his hand affectionately over his wife's head and looking out into the moon-washed distances. "But legal necessity knows no law—not even that of love and beauty. So, *au revoir!*"

The night was so bright, the air so dry and balmy, that the lovers preferred a stroll along the gravel-walks to the seclusion of their vine-hung corner. They came into sight, once in a while, of the two matrons left on the piazza, drifting slowly across the crest of the hill, like dark and white-sailed convoys on a silvery sea.

"How happy they are!" Mrs. Phelps brought it

out in a contented sigh. "'All the world loves a lover!' I am almost ashamed to confess how fully I am making Marion's romance mine. I dream and idealize and plan for her until the sweet excitement is but a degree less than the happy unrest of my own engagement. I suppose every woman understands this vicarious enjoyment of another's golden age."

"Unfortunately for romance, all women are not like you—and Marion!" The pause was just long enough to make the conclusion of the sentence slightly invidious. "*My* vicarious satisfaction is in the idea that Rex will soon have a home of his own and that, then some of my alkaline offices will be remitted. Reginald is vitriolic acid,—his namesake son, oil—Oil of Lucca, if you will,—clear, odorless, and *slow!* I am oxide of calcium—carbonate of soda—protoxide of potassium—whatever typifies powerful neutrality, nullifying, blending, taking away from one and giving to another. Reginald told me, one day, in a fit of good-humored vexation (he is never cross with *me*), that the whole sum and description of my office might be given in one word—*lye!* Spell it either way! The times I have lied that boy out of disgrace and his father into graciousness, would give a lightning-calculator work for a week. Evil done for good's sake doesn't hurt my conscience, but the vocation has become monotonous. Yes! I am selfishly glad that Rex's marriage is probable, and not distant."

"You have been very kind to the motherless boy, and he appreciates it," said Mrs. Phelps, gravely.

"I have done my duty—not as a stepmother, but as a moderately sensible woman. I took the boy into

my confidence the day I arrived here from my bridal-trip. He had refused to attend the wedding. I hope his father had not tried to flog him into it, hut I have asked no questions. He met me, colorless and cold as a January icicle, and called me "Mrs. Lupton." Such a forlorn figure as he was! Taller at fourteen than I at twenty-one, slim and stiff, he reminded me of a pair of curling-tongs, with such a haughty look on his face, and the most miserable eyes you can imagine! I didn't offer to kiss him, or do the conventional sugary-spicy second-mother in any other way; only talked to him as to any nice lad whom I might happen to dine with. But when Reginald had gone to the works in the afternoon, I made friends with his son. It was my proposal that he should call me "Isabel" instead of "Mother," and regard me,—I didn't even say, "as a sister," but "as another fellow." We have never had a dispute, or exchanged a cross word. Our relations are peculiar, perhaps, but the device works smoothly.

"Whatever the catechism may say of the chief end of man, that of woman is to keep the running-gear of life well oiled. Friction is always 'bad form.' Needless discomfort is one of the cardinal sins according to my creed."

CHAPTER IV.

WHEN Marion, having parted with Rex on the now deserted portico, ascended the stairway toward her chamber, she saw that her hostess's door was ajar. This was the signal that she wished to be visited by her friend before retiring—one usually obeyed with alacrity. For an instant the girl's step lagged, her face denoted doubt or unwillingness. Then she went forward and tapped lightly.

Mrs. Phelps appeared, clad in a white wrapper, her hair wound loosely about her nobly-formed head. She was too stately in build and carriage to look girlish, but, in the imperfect light, she was a handsome woman of not more than five-and-twenty years old. Her happy, busy life was to her the gift of perpetual youth.

"Richard will be up late writing, so we can have a long talk," she said, cheerily. "I will come to you, since I have made my preparations for the night, and you have not."

When both were in Marion's room, and the visitor had drawn a chair to the window and established herself therein, she continued:

"Rex is certainly one of the least selfish of men, the most generously-considerate of lovers."

"That is a time-worn observation," said Marion, in

mock demureness ; "I have an impression that I have heard it a couple of hundred times before."

"You will hear it a couple of thousand times if we all live five years longer, and I do my duty by you both. As I was saying, Miss Bayard, when you offered that irrelevant remark, where will you find another man who would be punctual to the appointed hour of leave-taking on the night before such a long absence, because he feared to weary the girl who is to travel to-morrow? I did not expect you upstairs before eleven o'clock at the earliest."

"You might have counted more correctly upon the principles and habits of the 'model young man of Freehold,' as his bitter-sweet step-mamma calls him."

"That is one thing I want to speak of," interpolated Mrs. Phelps, eagerly. "I am convinced that you habitually, and I occasionally, do her gross injustice. I wish you could have heard her describe Rex to-night, as she saw him for the first time, and how she arranged the terms of their intercourse. She told it in her flippant, cynical strain, but one could discern the throb of the mother-heart through it all."

She rehearsed the dialogue as faithfully as was consistent with her desire to put the step-mother in the most amiable light compatible with truth.

Marion had not lighted the gas, the moon sufficing to show her the way from dressing-table to wardrobe and drawers. She listened, silently, while divesting herself of the gown she had worn that evening, and assuming a peignoir, so pale-blue in tint that it looked dead-white in the moonbeams when she seated herself opposite the narrator. Her hair drooped over her

shoulders, partially veiling one cheek, making a curtain on the other side, on which the perfect profile was silhouetted distinctly, so statuesque was the stillness of the bent head. Faint sparkles of light from the diamonds on the third finger of her left hand, struck face, gown, and hair.

"I feel that you are not in sympathy with me," Mrs. Phelps interrupted herself to say at length. "Your judgment is biassed by the inevitable intolerance of youth. As you advance in years your moral standard will be less rigid, your spiritual perceptions clearer. The bare fact that this poor woman married a rich, elderly man when she was young and poor, is to you *prima facie* evidence that she is coarse-natured and mercenary. Yet she may have loved her husband for himself. He is a very attractive man, and is devoted to her. Give her the benefit of that and other doubts. She has so much that is admirable in her that you must recognize it by-and-by."

"I recognize your large, almost divine, humanity," answered Marion slowly and sweetly, without raising her head; "your depths of charity for your kind, your heights of hope for them. While you pleaded for this 'poor' creature, I laid my sneering mouth in the dust at your feet and asked, 'What am I that I should judge even her?' She is of my class, Madonna! Never in time or eternity will either of us be worthy to stand on your level. In the world to come we will be together on the other side of the fixed gulf—she and I—and looking over to the blessed plains where you walk in white array, will stare, each into the other's hopeless eyes, and say, 'As was the sowing, so is the

reaping. God was not mocked or deceived, although *she* was!' No, no!" drawing back from the other's gesture of horrified entreaty. "You have had your say, and I will not have my mouth stopped! You and Rex are in innocent complicity to beguile me into the belief that this 'poor' thing, who cajoles all men, and blinds a woman now and then when she chances upon a heart so clean that dirt will not stick to it—this nonpareil wife and mother, this exemplar to step-parents, even while she disclaims the title—this garnished, garish *lie!* is in any respect what she chooses to seem. You and he sincerely believe that she is willing to have me marry Rex. One reason that would hold me fast to my engagement were there no other, is that she dreads my entrance into the family. We have distrusted and antagonized one another from our first meeting. She is a spy and informer, she would be a traitor if she had ever professed to be true. When I become a Lupton in name, there will be war to the death. Heaven speed the day!"

She laughed out in uttering it—not wildly, but, it seemed, naturally; raised her clasped hands above her head, then brought them down lightly upon her companion's knees, looked saucily into her anxious face:

"You are so troubled that you cannot speak—like the obfuscated Psalmist. I am reminded all the time, when with you, of John B. Gough's definition of a 'verdant man,'—"One who is so entirely honest that he thinks everybody else as honest as himself.' Let us gather up the shivered remains of my step-mother-in-law-that-is-to-be-please-Heaven-and-not-Mrs.-Isabel-

Lupton — and give them decent burial! There is enough that is corrupt in me to alienate you from me without introducing other offensive elements. Tell me, you dearest and purest woman on this sin-scarred globe, is it easy for you to be good? Does it come by nature or by grace to do right always and everywhere? Does temptation take hold of you at some one point, and will not be dislodged? Do you really *enjoy* the practice of virtue? I read something the other day that has haunted me ever since. It purported to be the prayer of a saint: 'O God! show kindness to the wicked; for on the good Thou hast already bestowed kindness enough by having created them virtuous!' We, the wicked—(don't interrupt me. Feel my pulse and how cool my hands are!)—we, the wicked, know as well as did that fusty old moralist, or whoever said it for him, that the things we barter salvation for as pearls of price are as apt to be viper's eggs, that in hatching will sting us to the death. But the barter goes on! Madonna! Lady of Mercy!" sinking to her knees before the listener could guess her intent, and casting her arms about her friend— "I am *very* wretched! very sinful! Pity and pray for me!"

Mrs. Phelps' nature was too healthy, her lines of thought too direct, to allow her to sympathize with mere sentimentality. Morbidness was, to her perception, disease. She drew the fair head to her bosom, kissed, patted and held it there, while she replied to the rapid incoherence of the long monologue. Her diagnosis was characteristic:

"Nine-tenths of your spiritual struggles are phys-

ical malaise, precious child. Your fine nervous system is unstrung, your will-power weakened. Introspection was always your foible. I used to tell you—don't you remember? that you reminded me of Mrs. Whitney's Anstiss Dolbeare, who was 'always holding up her soul,' to her husband, 'with a thorn in it!' Recent events have augmented your malady. The mental and moral retina magnifies your defects, and exaggerates the virtues of others in like proportion. All of us have noticed that you were not quite your usual self of late. When you come back to us from Albany, we will laugh together over these distorted fancies. The change of place and air, even the necessity of exerting yourself to make friends with strangers, will work wonders. The prescription is homely, but good.

"Now, my dear girl—so dear that I must laugh at all the crazy invectives she has been launching against herself—I must not spoil your beauty-sleep by more talk. You are too tired to know what you are saying. I must tell you as I used to say to Paul on stormy nights,—'Whatever you hear, believe that it is nothing worse than the wind, and the harder it blows to-night, the more likely are we to have fair weather to-morrow!'"

She raised the kneeling figure, put back the luxuriant hair from brow and cheeks, reaching up to do this, Marion being taller than she, all the large, benign maternity of her nature in smile and look and touch.

"My precious friend! I cannot have you unhappy even from imaginary causes. I will light the gas

now, and ring for a glass of iced milk and a biscuit. You ate very little supper, and you will not sleep if you go to bed fasting."

Marion met her as she returned from giving the order, rested her hands upon her shoulders and held her fast—gazing into her eyes with a strange, piteous smile,—a thirsty, hungry aching, not translatable by the tongue.

"You Christians profess to believe in the devil, yet call his directest attacks 'ganglionic affections.' You mistake the cry of a tormented soul, more afraid of itself than of Satan in person, for 'digestive irritability.' What kind of fluid does 'saving faith' put into people's veins—lukewarm milk, or glycerine? But there!" kissing her passionately, once and again—"forgive me, placid, untempted heart! You would comprehend my bitter jargoning if you could, I know. You *would* help me if you knew how—wouldn't you?"

"To the half of my kingdom, love!" in simple fervor. "Here is Mary with your lunch. Put it here, on the dressing-table, Mary!"

An envelope lay by the toilet-cushion, sealed side uppermost. In pushing it aside to make room for the tray, Mrs. Phelps noted with the surface-consciousness which serves human creatures instead of instinct, that it was oblong, rather large, and bulky as with an enclosure of several sheets. She had nearly called Marion's attention to it, but a second thought-wave, as shallow as the first, suggested that the girl had probably sealed up some of her own papers to be left behind or packed.

Then she forgot it altogether.

Marion came down late to breakfast next morning, appearing at half-past eight, dressed for travelling. Salome was at the piano. Mr. Phelps and Paul were marching up and down the piazza, the boy animated in talk, the father hearkening smilingly. Both raised their hats to the young lady as she met Mrs. Phelps in the dining-room door. The table had been cleared and reset for one person. Mrs. Lupton, cool and dainty in a much be-laced muslin morning-gown, sat by a window looking out upon the porch, a long wreath of honeysuckle in her hand. The day was sunny, fragrant, and altogether delicious.

"You are going then?" said the hostess, kissing Marion, and holding her hand while she led her to her chair.

Her eyes were clear and soft, Marion's languid; tone and mien in one were blithe; the other moved and spoke drowsily.

"I have made up my mind—yes! I am sorry I overslept myself."

"The wisest thing you could do, my dear—(Strawberries, James! No cream! Miss Bayard prefers them without.) I would not have you awakened, even to see Rex, who was over here an hour ago. Mrs. Lupton has just come in to say that she will send Thomas down with a note as soon as she learns what you mean to do."

"She would probably prefer to write a line herself," suggested the step-mother, courteously.

She had merely bowed at the girl's entrance. She seldom kissed anybody. Much as she disliked "Freehold ways," she was a genuine New Englander in

non-effusiveness ; was as chary of caresses as if she had been born in the shadow of the bald, gray obelisk that perpetuates a misnomer.

A spent surge of color swept Marion's cheeks.

"It is not necessary for any one to write," she said haughtily. "Let Thomas say that I shall go to Albany by the noon train."

Rex Lupton was at the station when the Phelps carriage drove up. Mr. Phelps sprang out first. In his faultless travelling suit of gray cloth, he was the most distinguished-looking man there. His Panama hat, with its narrow mourning-band ; his gray gloves stitched with black ; the cut and set of his clothes, the fashion of his boots—were metropolitan, not provincial. His frank, genial face made the dim interior of the smoky station bright ; porters touched their hats and grinned as he passed ; men bowed with a hearty word of inquiry or farewell ; women looked admiringly after him. Like some floral darlings of the sun, he gave off, as well as absorbed light. Having achieved that rarest of accomplishments, affability untinged with patronage, he found the Freehold public willing to forgive his unbroken good-fortune, almost glad for and with him in his evident enjoyment of it.

Rex took possession of Marion, and Richard gave his arm to his wife. He was unusually gentle with her, even for him, to-day, and glanced down lovingly at her as they walked toward the platform.

"Expect me back to-morrow night, or the next day at farthest, my darling. I shall telegraph as soon as we reach Albany. You will sleep more

soundly for knowing that we are safely at our journey's end. And take care of your precious self while I am away. Take the children for a long drive this afternoon, and ask Mrs. Lupton to pass the evening with you. I do not like to think of you as lonely without Marion and myself."

"How thoughtful you are of me! One would think me a bit of egg-shell porcelain instead of a substantial pipkin able to bear all sorts of hard knocks without being nicked. I hope you will spare a little solicitude from my well, hearty self to bestow upon that dear child whose white cheeks and forced spirits make me uneasy for her. She is ill at ease from some cause, Richard, sick in body, or in mind, or in both. Her wild talk terrifies me sometimes. I could almost fancy that her mind is slightly unhinged. I know you do not approve of her in all respects, but for my sake be patient with her to-day. I wish you could draw her out to confide her trouble to you, whatever it may be, and impart to her something of your hopeful, optimistic philosophy."

The train was entering the building; Rex, with Marion on his arm, looked over his shoulder for them; the baggage truck rumbled by; passengers poured hustlingly out of the waiting-room; the noisy tide swept all forward.

Richard had only time to say hurriedly—"Depend on me to do my best!"

In another minute and a half, his wife and Marion's betrothed stood together on the platform, her loving eyes and Rex's pale, patient smile directed toward a window of the gliding parlor car, framing a

white, beautiful face whose mournful intentness of gaze haunted the two for many a day and year afterward. Richard's warm, lucent, blue eyes, sweeping mustache, and chestnut curls, uncovered in his parting salutation, showed beyond the pallid visage.

"She is in safe and kindly keeping, thank Heaven!" uttered Mrs. Phelps, turning away with her companion.

"She could not be in better!" responded the lover, heartily. "Your husband is the most enviable man I know. I would give ten years of my life to have his magnetic power over his fellow-creatures. One always feels better, stronger, and happier for being in his society."

"Thank you!"

Through a happy, foolish mist she saw the freshet of sunlight breaking through and gilding the smoke that billowed against the begrimed rafters to the arched entrance of the station; the tracks and the dingy quarter of the town they made dingier. The rattling of wagons and the rumble of an in-coming freight train, obliged her to raise her voice somewhat, and it broke a little:

"I know he is all you say—and more. But I like to hear you praise him. The best wish I can make for you and Marion is that, at the end of fifteen years of married life, you may be as happy in each others' love, as utterly *contentful* (I like the obsolete word!) as we are. It is the only life worth living, Rex!"

"I know it!"

At her request, he stepped after her into the open carriage, and they drove up town together. The

streets were full of people; Mrs. Phelps bowed this way and that, and Rex's hand was scarcely off his hat for ten seconds at a time, while they slowly threaded the business thoroughfares of the lively little town. Their salutations were very dissimilar in manner and spirit. Her social, benevolent temperament told in every motion. She bowed to acquaintances as if genuinely pleased at the meeting, to such as she knew well with a smile eminently flattering to the recipient, provided he believed in the sincerity of the demonstration. Rex was alike gravely impassive to all. Inferiors in station called him "stuck-up"; associates in business and in society considered him cold and unapproachable. While nobody cared to cast the elder Lupton's lowly origin in the ambitious man's face, the son heard often that his grandfather was a common mill-hand. One of the few consistencies of our common human nature is the disposition to cast mud at starched clothes. The laundry-work of Rex Lupton's mental and moral "get-up" was conspicuous in stiffness and Chinese polish. His personal unpopularity was no secret to him. If he had discovered it in no other way, his father's habitual sarcasm on this head would have enlightened him.

"'When the cats are away, the mice will play!'" said a raucous, spiteful voice on his side of the carriage as they turned a corner.

The landau drawn by a pair of glossy bays, and driven by a smart colored coachman, almost grazed the curb-stone on which a rotund citizen gossiped with a neighbor while waiting for a street-car. Both men laughed coarsely. Rex gazed steadfastly for-

ward, his countenance unmoved by so much as the flicker of an eye-lid. Mrs. Phelps chatted on lightly, unsuspicious of comment and application. Neither was lost upon her companion, inly writhing in the anguish of a sensitive nature that is likewise self-conscious. He would hold everything pertaining to him and his, high above the touch of soiled hands, and, if possible, out of the sight of vulgar eyes. To at least one-third of the foot-passengers they met and passed, the equipage, with its gleaming panels and prancing horses in silver-mounted harness, was a personal grievance. Given excess of self-esteem, an eight-generation-old belief in the right of every citizen of the Republic (because it *is* a Republic, and he a citizen) to enjoy all the rights possessed by any other, and you have Communism, *im*pure and simple, let the field in which it roots itself be Boston or Chicago.

The tasteful apparel of the clear-browed woman who leaned back on the springy cushions and shaded her eyes with a lace-edged, ivory-handled parasol; the style and material of her escort's morning coat and hat; the evident satisfaction of the pair in each other's society; the damning coincidence of this insolently-triumphant progress through the most public part of the town at mid-day—furnished appetizing matter for dinner table talk in a hundred homes, in a community that prided itself upon the diligence with which the members minded their own business. The second class of egoists defined by the satirist, as "those who live themselves, but don't let others live," had more than a two-third majority in the hill-girt,

self-righteous city, that would always, according to Mrs. Lupton, be a village.

"'O, Paradise! O, Paradise!'" quoted Mrs. Phelps surveying the landscape from the colonade.

Rex lingered at her side, for a moment, after they alighted. A shimmering haze, luminous with Milton's "azure sheen," like the diaphanous, faintly-purpled veil which the master of the water-color brush, Winslow Homer, hangs between us and his pictures—swam over valley and sky.

> "The long, bright river, slowly drawing
> Its waters from the purple hill!"

"The lines are always in my mind when I look over this scene on summer days," pursued the lady, her sweet, quiet eyes feasting themselves upon it. "It is a beautiful thing to be alive, Rex! such an 'alive' as ours!

"Won't you lunch with the children and myself?" descending suddenly to the homely and the hospitable. "Our mid-day meal is at one. Come in and help make it cheerful! We do not dine, strictly speaking, in papa's absence."

He declined with sincere thanks. His luncheon must be a hasty affair, since he had already been so long absent from the office. In saying it, he offered his hand and she laid hers in it with frankest sisterly affection.

"Come what may, you and I will always be friends!" an impulse she could not resist or explain made her say. "If you were my brother—or son—I could not be more fond of you. That you should love and marry the dearest friend I ever had, or ex-

pect ever to have is one of the perfect consummations that mortal dreams rarely have. I shall have a telegram this evening. Shall I send it to you?"

"Let me come for it—please! We will console each other—measurably!"

He said it with the shy archness that was his brightest expression, raised her ungloved fingers to his lips, and ran fleetly down the winding walk toward his own home.

It was after eight o'clock that evening when he again passed the lilac-hedge and mounted the slope. The moon still hung so near the horizon that her light was yellow-white. "The *cream* of the evening," Mrs. Lupton had called the hour.

Her stepson had left her on her front porch, her eldest boy and girl with her. From policy and habit, she made herself entertaining to everybody. The woman who hoarded her brillancy for society, and turned her lightless side to her family was, she was wont to say, "a veritable lunatic." The children thought mamma "great fun"; Rex was smiling at her parting sally as he came around to the front of the Phelps house.

"Hush-sh-sh!" sounded from among the vine-shadows, and Salome, his pet and ally, glided out to him.

"Mamma thinks I have gone to the post-office with Paul," she whispered. "She is singing to herself!"

The shutters of one French window were open, those of the other shut. The child and the newcomer sat down on a rustic settee near this last. The low-hung moon, looking horizontally between the leaves

of the creepers, showed in indistinct outline the figure at the piano. "Mamma's made-up songs" had been the delectation of the twins since their nursery-days. Few others ever heard them. Rex's honorable scruples as to the propriety of his position were quelled by the recollection of his tuneless perceptions. Nobody need fear *his* criticism.

The performer had a good touch, and a sympathetic voice, a flexible contralto of fair compass. This Rex did not know. What he did recognize was the infinite tenderness in tone and word, the purity of enunciation that gave each syllable definiteness and meaning. Each stanza was first murmured to a faintly-throbbed accompaniment, consisting chiefly of chords, the vocalization was rather a chant than a tune. Sometimes, she sang a line twice or three times over, altering words or emphasis. Whatever were the faults of metre or musical measure, the auditors, keeping time to both with heart-beats, felt hour, music and sentiment to be sweetly accordant.

Thus ran the wife's love thought—

"They say that spring is the time for love;
Do I love you best in the spring?
When the sky is soft and blue above,
And warm life stirs in everything;
And the bird sings low to his brooding mate,—
Darling! is it then my love is most great?

"Or is it in summer that I love you the best?
When the sun shines hot o'er land and sea,
When Earth in her rich green robe is dressed,
And all is fair as fair can be,
When Heaven smiles above, and Earth smiles below,—
Do I love you most then? I'm sure you must know.

"Do you think my love is in autumn most strong?
When on still airs the falling leaves float;
When fair days grow short and cool nights grow long,
And even the robin has hushed his sweet note:
When the clematis stands like a pale-sheeted ghost,—
My own! is it *then* I love you the most?

"You know that my love is the same alway,—
For, dearest, my heart is just as true
When snows falls fast and the skies are gray
As when flowers are bright and heavens are blue.
Through all the sunlight and clouds of our life,
That love cannot change—for I am your *wife!*"

She was singing it low to herself when she stepped through the long window upon the piazza, her India muslin gown waving and trailing after her:

"When Heaven smiles above and Earth smiles below!"

Salome came forward.

"Mamma, dear, don't be startled! Mr. Rex and I are out here enjoying the moonlight and the honeysuckles."

The delicate address with which she avoided mention of the music, leaving the singer to suppose that their attention had been absorbed by the beauty of the night, was an inheritance. Her mother held that to make life as easy for other people as truth and duty allow, was a part of every-day religion; to say disagreeable things unless, under compulsion, was a violation of the Golden Rule.

"Ah! good-evening, Rex!' she said in an unembarrassed tone. "The telegram has not come yet. I told Paul to call by for it on his way home from the post-office."

She raised herself on tiptoe to pull down a spray of

honeysuckle. In lowering her hand with the flowers in it, she caught sight of Paul's head above the rise of the hill. He was running, swerving oddly from side to side of the drive, as if dizzy. When he saw his mother he threw up both hands and stopped. She ran out to him, followed by the others.

"Mamma! mamma!" gasped the boy, catching blindly at her. "Try—to bear up. I—I—wouldn't tell you—if I could—help it. There has been—a dreadful accident on the railroad, and—papa and—Cousin Marion are both—*killed!*"

He shrieked out the awful word hoarsely, and fell to the earth in a dead faint.

CHAPTER V.

WHATEVER of active kindness Mrs. Lupton had showed to her next-door neighbors up to the time of the railway accident that filled the hitherto unsmitten household with woe, was as nothing to what followed the event. Without bustle or friction, the house was put in order for the arrival of what a second despatch described as "the dead and dying victims of the disaster."

The lifeless body of Marion Bayard was extricated from the burning *débris* of the wrecked train. It was hoped that death had been instant. The fire had seized upon her clothing before she was drawn out. In the plunge down the embankment, Mr. Phelps was dashed through a window and caught under the car. Two ribs were broken ; there were indications that the lungs were pierced by the shattered bone ; one arm was fractured, and a deep scalp-wound on the back of the head might mean that the brain was hopelessly injured.

His wife did not quit his bedside for twelve hours after the wreck of superb manhood was laid there, but hers was not a watch of passive nor yet of obtrusive sorrow. Gratefully declining Mr. Lupton's offer to take her place while the surgeons did their work, she won their respect by her silent self-possession and intelligent coöperation. She did not lament aloud ; the

deep, dark eyes were tearless ; her speech studiedly calm.

" I have done that woman injustice," said Mr. Lupton to his wife, the night after the accident. " I should have said that, in a trial like this, her affections would overbear her reason. She has herself well in hand."

" Do the doctors give any hope since the last consultation ? "

"Not a ray ! It is almost certain that there is internal hæmorrhage. He will hardly last out the night. *Then* she will break down. I had to go to her for instructions as to the other funeral. I declare, I never so hated an errand before in my life ! She grew deathly-white and quivered like an aspen-leaf when I broke the matter to her ; then, rallied and talked rationally and calmly. The poor girl's brother and his wife are abroad, you know. There is no one to dispute Mrs. Phelps's wish that the interment should be in the Phelps's lot in our cemetery. It is a sensible arrangement for all interested."

" Have you consulted Rex ? "

" She asked me to speak to him, then said : 'No ! perhaps it would be well for me to write to him.' She actually wrote this note, of a dozen lines or so, in full sight of her dying husband, and her hand did not tremble ! *There* are nerve and will for you ! I knocked at Rex's door this evening before coming over, and asked if he had any message, and if he wanted anything. He answered without unlocking the door that there was nothing I could do for him. Has he eaten anything all day ? "

"I sent up a tray at dinner and again at tea-time. He will let nobody see him suffer, you may be sure; still, he ought to have admitted *you*. I must go home for an hour now, before settling matters here for the night. Go with me? No, my dear. It is clear moonlight, and one of us should be here all the time. I will take the note to Rex."

It was unsealed, and before delivering it to her stepson she read it in the privacy of her chamber.

"DEAR REX (it began):

"In days to come, it will comfort you to think that our darling's last resting-place is in our own beautiful Freehold Cemetery. She will be laid there, by loving hands, to-morrow afternoon. In her brother's absence, I am called upon to act in the matter, and I feel that I am consulting your wishes with my own.

"They tell me she is very lovely as she sleeps, to-night. I cannot leave my husband to see her yet. Should you wish to go to the room, the visit would better be paid at ten o'clock, when the house is quiet. Salome will wait for you on the piazza and be your guide.

"Affectionately yours,

"MADELINE PHELPS."

Mrs. Lupton refolded the sheet and tucked it back into the envelope, thoughtfully.

"That woman has fine natural taste," she said, aloud. "Not a drop of medicated oil and wine here! She knows the raw surface would not bear it. How well she understands him!"

She carried the letter to Rex's room, with no affectation of treading softly, tapped gently, slipped the envelope under the door, and walked audibly away to

the other end of the corridor. There, she pulled off her slippers and crept back. The envelope had disappeared; her acute ear detected the rustle of the paper as it was opened. A soundless pause was broken by a deep groan:

"O, my GOD!"

Sob upon sob followed, drawn shudderingly from depths she could not fathom. It was gruesome eavesdropping. She betook herself to the nursery to see that the children were all right for the night. As mother and neighbor she had no superior in decorous Freehold.

Gerald was wide-awake, and sat up in his crib at her entrance.

"I say, mamma!" with a nervous gulp, "it's a *dreadful* thing to be dead, isn't it? I can't sleep for thinking of it."

"That is foolish and babyish, my man! It would be sensible and brave to go to sleep without worrying yourself over what cannot be helped."

She beat up and turned his pillow, and brought him a drink of water. His hands were hot, his eyes large and shining.

"I'm awfully sorry for Marion!" trying to control the trembling pout his mother might call "babyish." "She was always very nice and jolly with me. Isn't Rex awfully cut up about it?"

"My son!" The judicious parent said it firmly, but not ungently. "Only silly people run the risk of making themselves ill and having nightmares by fretting over other people's troubles. I want you to shut your eyes now and go to sleep like a good boy.

Think of something else. Let me tell you a secret, to be kept between you and me for awhile. Papa is thinking of buying a pony for you to ride—a horse of your very own! Gently!" for he had thrown his arms about her neck. "If you get weak and ill by lying awake o' nights, you won't be able to use him. Now, good-night! Let me know, in the morning, what you mean to call the pony.

"There's nothing like the expulsive power of a new idea," she said, in a self-gratulatory tone, when on a second visit to the boy, an hour later, she saw him sleeping sweetly, a half smile on the rosy mouth. "Tact is always better than discipline in the nursery."

A slight form hovered in the shaded corner of the piazza when she returned to the house of mourning. She feigned not to see it, but she repeated inwardly to her only confidante, "How well she understands him! She knows he will come, and not *before* ten o'clock! He is nothing if not punctual." Her husband and two doctors were smoking in the library, discussing the political situation in decorously-guarded tones. Men—and women—die every day, and railway casualties may be depended upon to keep the mortality rate at a steady average. The State senatorial contest is to a new candidate an event. The nominee felt no abashment at sight of his wife beckoning to him from the hall. She was a woman of the world, with fewer sentimental shams about her than any other of the sex he had ever met. That was one of his reasons for marrying her, and had much to do with his continued admiration. He came out

to her at once, holding his cigar behind him. Isabel never interrupted him uselessly. Her beck had the authority of another's call.

"Rex will be over in five minutes to see Marion," she said, very low. "Salome is watching for him and will show him upstairs. Will you close that door, that nobody may see him pass?"

He nodded acquiescently. Then, because she was so pretty in the subdued falling light from the hall chandelier, or moved by this fresh evidence of her consideration for others' comfort, he stooped and kissed her.

"You are the best woman living, my pet!"

She shook her head with a bewitching little grimace, and as he went back to the library, glided into the darkened drawing-room and waited in a comfortable lounging-chair for what would happen next.

In the boding hush of the outer night, the crunch of slow steps on the gravel path were audible for two minutes or more before they fell on the piazza floor. From her well-chosen angle of observation, she saw the slight, dark shape meet the taller in the moonlighted opening between the pillars. Not a word was spoken; hands met in a long grasp, then the pair entered the hall and passed toward the stairs. The chandelier showed the step-son's face to the watcher, and even her cool pulses were thrilled. Drawn, sharpened, livid, the sunken eyes set in dark rings, and bleared with tears and sleeplessness, it was older than his father's, yet bore a hitherto unobserved resemblance to it. That people should take life—or a death not their own—hard, was one of the enigmas

of existence to the best woman living. She shook her head again, and more than once, as she followed, at a discreet interval, the mute pair up the stairs. One motion was of gratitude that Salome, and not she, was the chosen guide to the stillest room of the stilled mansion.

That weak superstition did not enter into this thanksgiving was proved by the midnight visit she paid, alone, to the closed chamber. She was secure from observation, did she wish to weep alone in that dread solitude. Her husband was asleep on the parlor-sofa, and would not awake unless she summoned him to see his friend die. Mrs. Phelps and the family physician watched beside the unconscious patient. Salome, Paul and the servants were in bed. It was in keeping with her lord's eulogium that the best of women should ascertain by personal observation that all was decent and orderly in the appointments she had directed for the accommodation of the dumb occupant of the large south room, known in the house as Marion Bayard's.

The night was very cold for the season. Sudden frostiness had driven back summer from the hill-tops, and the cold wave flooded the valley. The draught that met Mrs. Lupton on the threshold was more chill that out of doors. A strong east wind blew in at the window where Marion had knelt, her head in her friend's lap, forty-eight hours ago. The shadows of the vine leaves on the carpet shivered in the blast. Mrs. Lupton went straight to a drawer and got out a shawl for her shoulders. Her next act was to smooth sundry wrinkles in the linen sheet that

draped the bed, and to plump up the mattress. Even these slight disorders offended her exquisite sense of neatness. She was a fastidious housewife. A slight indentation of the bed, and the creased sheet, showed where the heavy head of a kneeling man had rested. The fine texture of the linen clung so closely to that which it covered that the classic profile was clearly defined. The upper edge of the sheet was not perfectly straight, reverently as it had been replaced after the hot, vain rain of Love's kisses and tears had fallen on cheek, brow and lips, Love's last look until the resurrection morning been given. The new-comer pictured the scene to herself while she rectified the trifling irregularities resulting from the hour-long visit of the lover.

The gas had been but half-high when she came in; she had turned it on, putting out the sympathetic moonlight. Next, she locked the door, closed the shutters, and, opening a wardrobe, took down the gray travelling dress she had helped strip from the girl's body. One breadth of the skirt was scorched, but the woollen fabric had not kindled fast. Most of the garment was intact, although blackened and stained.

"A violent death is non-æsthetic," thought the well-balanced brain, as the fingers touched the roughened, stiffened texture.

Only a sense of duty kept her to the task. The burnt side of the gown was the left; the pocket was on the right, so cunningly masked by drapery and trimming that only a woman could have found it. A sheer handkerchief, with "M. B." worked in the cor-

ner, came out first; then a vinaigrette, a card, and, under all the rest, was a letter. A somewhat large envelope, directed to "Miss Bayard," with no other address. It had been sealed, and cut open at one end—not quite evenly, but as if the scissors had wavered in haste or agitation. With the purposeful system that had marked each step in what was, evidently, the means to an end, the best woman living pulled out the double sheet of paper, and, after a glance at the handwriting, pushed Marion's lounging-chair under the bracket-burner and seated herself for a deliberate perusal. A gleam of gratification crossed her visage at the first sentence. When alone with her one faithful counsellor,—her long-headed self,—she let her face speak. It said now that she had hardly dared hope to find so soon what she was sure existed somewhere. She read every word of the six closely written pages without further comment, uttered or looked. The chirography was excellent, the light overhead shone directly upon it. Yet she read slowly, getting the sense of each word, the bearing of each sentence as she went along.

Her hold upon herself was phenomenal, but, when she arose, her face was paler by many shades than when she sat down,—the clear pallor of intense and suppressed excitement, not the dusky blenching of fear or horror. The search was prosecuted no further. The handkerchief was restored, with card and vinaigrette, to the pocket, the defaced gown hung, with careful conspicuousness, on the middle peg of the *armoire*. Before turning the gas down, she folded

back the sheet, and gazed for a full minute upon the face thus exposed.

She was an omnivorous reader, and had a faithful memory. She recalled, now, that Celia Brooke in "Middlemarch" had seen "something like the reflection of a white, sunlit wing" on Dorothea's face when Mr. Casaubon's love-letter was brought to her. Involuntarily, the unimaginative Isabel glanced upward, as expecting to discover the source of the mysterious radiance.

"They tell me she is very lovely as she sleeps to-night," Mrs. Phelps had written.

Her beauty was superhuman and indefinable. A faint, sweet, tender smile relaxed the curves of the mouth; the brow was pure and lofty as with the triumph of the ransomed ones who "dwell forever in the light."

The gazer's lineaments did not soften before the ineffable loveliness strangers could not regard for many minutes for fast-springing tears; in beholding which, Rex Lupton's heart had broken. Mrs. Lupton's intent look was philosophical, and in no wise womanly, if to women be denied the power of impersonal analysis.

"You hated me from the first, poor girl!" she said, half-aloud in her gentlest, most unfeeling tone. "I see, now, how much reason you had to be afraid of me. Yet you never quailed when I looked at you. We were unequally matched. I, for example, would never have kept that letter—or answered it. You made a great mistake, child!"

The fixed sweetness of the smile, the pale glory of

the brow, did not change. The majestic indifference of the dead to love or malice,—sublime serenity, that rests alike upon the faces of those who, in their life-time, had their good things, and of those who looked for a better country, even a heavenly,—the awful *impartiality* of death! these are what lend terror and might to the word, "departed." Living, the girl's haughty spirit would have defied this woman's guile; would have resented, with imperious scorn, the suggestion of her compassion. Out of the body, wherever that passionate, fearless spirit might be, it was impotent for defence or attack. That which it had parted from—the breathless, beautiful shape, laid in lily-white state, under the passionless eyes of her whom she had "hated! *hated!* HATED!"—and the fairer than lily fame that had been more to her than mortal existence or the hope of salvation,—were equally at the mercy of the invader of her death-chamber.

An added shade of seriousness was on the victor's face, as she re-arranged the sheet, something in her eye that bespoke consciousness of other tasks to be done while the night lasted. She gave a pull to a chair here, a push there to a table,—the mechanical finishing touches of the born and educated housemistress, before lowering the gas and leaving the apartment. She locked the door noiselessly behind her, without removing the key. Outside another door on the same floor she halted, her delicate ear inclined toward it. A thin line of light showed beneath it and at one edge; beyond was the sound of deep regurgitant respiration, hard, but as yet regular. There was then, no change

in the wounded man's condition. She measured the action of the hurt lungs,—noted, as a reassuring sign, the silence of doctor and nurse. Wifely solicitude found nothing to arouse it in the dark drawing-room where she tarried for an instant. Her husband's slumbers were profound for a politician.

The library was unoccupied, the sofa there luxurious. It was a little before one o'clock ; no decided variation in the patient's symptoms was likely to occur until three—the ebb-tide of the ocean of human life, when, all the world over, pulses and spirits run lowest. She locked herself in, naturally, being both modest and timid. The doctor, or a burglar, or perhaps the faithful butler, a family servant, might prowl through the house and enter her sanctum while she slept. A couple of pillows, piled at the head of the lounge, an afghan tossed across the foot, were seemly provision for such light refreshment in sleep as she might snatch against the time of need. She stretched herself on the improvised couch, without extinguishing the gas ; clasped her hands at the back of her head, rested a pair of great luminous eyes on the opposite wall, and thought hard for ten minutes. One of her boasts was that she could fall asleep without delay, or keep awake without discomfort, when she willed.

There were no tired, down-dropping lines in her countenance when, at the stroke of one from the mantel-clock, she leisurely arose. It would seem as if her brief resting-spell was as much a part of a plan as the directness with which she proceeded to ransack drawers and rifle pigeon-holes. She wrought deftly, rather steadily than fast, with alert eyes and intent ex-

pression. Every envelope was opened, the contents were glanced at, not read,—then it was returned duly to its position ; each stray scrap of written paper was keenly scrutinized.

Half-past two saw her at the end of the quest. Any one entering at that moment would have supposed that she had sprung from the lounge to open the door, leaving the crushed pillows and disordered covering as they were, without staying to adjust them, in her haste to hear tidings from the sick-room. Wide-awake, speculative, dissatisfied,—she stood in the middle of the floor, and looked absently about her. Her eyes sparkled into liveliness in falling upon a waste-paper basket thrust under a table at the back of the room, and crammed with papers.

In a twinkling, she drew it out, dragged it under the drop-light, and sat down upon the carpet beside it. A few inches from the top, she lighted upon a minute fragment of note-paper, twisted as it was torn, with ragged edges. Smoothing it out, she saw that it bore one word in pencil, "*the.*" Laying it on the desk she resumed her task, letting nothing elude eyes and fingers. It took half an hour to collect the bits, all small, some blank, all wrinkled by the twist and wrench of nervous fingers. She fitted them into one another, after restoring the rest of the waste-paper to the basket. It was a nice and critical piece of mosaic. With no show of impatience at the enforced tediousness of the operation she washed the surface of a blank sheet with mucilage, a bottle of which stood on the desk, and stuck each fragment into place with the precision of a type-setter. While they dried she got

pen and ink, not to lose precious time, and made a faithful transcript in bold, black characters, of the letter she had abstracted from the dead girl's pocket. She wrote rapidly, and legibly, and was used to copying documents, and writing business letters from her husband's dictation. The task done, she helped herself to a large envelope from the table-drawer, enclosed the scrap-work note and the letter, and pocketed them with the original of the epistle.

Four o'clock had struck; the robins were singing in the elms, the sparrows making up beds and serving nursery breakfasts in the honeysuckles clambering about the upper windows, as she wrote the last word. She turned out the lights, unbarred the shutters, and bathed her eyes in the dewy dawn. Two wakeful nights and a long busy day had tired even her indomitable head, but she enjoyed the novel aspect of a just awakening world; the deepening blush of the east, the sympathetic tint of the west, the freshness, fragrance and newness of a day as yet untouched by man's traffic and strife. She had a fine appreciation of natural beauties, and was glad of the chance of getting a glimpse of another phase. Then, she threw herself upon the couch she had occupied earlier in the night and with the matins of bird and bee in her ears fell into repose, enjoying three hours of such rest as sits balmily upon the lids of just women made perfect by approving consciences and easy stomachs.

The seams of the sods on Marion Bayard's grave were joining under July suns and showers; the long unconsciousness that had drowned the senses of Richard Phelps was yielding, by almost imperceptible

degrees, to the persistent force of the matchless constitution which knit bones, healed torn flesh and battled with the Apollyon of fever, while friends and physicians watched for the final scene,—when the best of women said quietly and kindly to the wife who had nearly been a widow,—

"Here is the key of Marion's room. I locked it the day she was taken away. She left her drawers and closets in perfect order, and I did not unpack her trunk. I think she would not have wished any hands but yours to touch her clothing and papers. In the drawer of her dressing-table you will find a long, buff envelope, marked in my handwriting with the date of the accident. Before sending the ruined travelling-dress away (it was a frightful object !) I emptied the pocket of a handkerchief, a vinaigrette, a card and an envelope that felt as if there were several letters in it. I sealed them all up together and put them in the drawer, thinking you might examine them when you felt able. I do not imagine there is anything of importance among these trifles, but I thought it best to be business-like."

Mrs. Phelps had grown thin and pale with grief and vigils. A few silver threads gleamed in her abundant hair. Her mourning-gown was of extreme simplicity, as befitted one whose business was nursing. The two matrons sat on the piazza, as on the afternoon of our introduction to them, six weeks before, and the sun was near his setting behind the waving line of hills. Salome, from her place on the steps, with a book on her knees, saw her mother's eyes take on a far, wistful look, her chin tremble.

"My angel-girl!" she breathed softly, and seemed to dream through the ensuing pause.

Salome was used to the peculiar expression and air with which she always spoke or heard Marion's name—wondered reverently, if the friends whose souls were so closely knit together in life were indeed still in communion with one another.

Mrs. Phelps aroused herself presently; put out her hand to her neighbor with a smile; spoke with the full, cordial tone, freighted with good-will that was less habitual with her in these late sad days than of old:

"How can I thank you for your delicacy—your thoughtfulness—for all your abundant goodness? I bless you in Marion's name and mine. I told Richard the whole truth yesterday. It had dawned upon him gradually and partially as he regained consciousness. He noticed, first, that he never saw her, or heard her speak; then, that no one mentioned her. Little by little, the poor, shaken brain pieced the story together, until, yesterday morning, he said to me—'Darling! was Marion fatally hurt?' I answered him truthfully, as the doctors had advised."

"Was he much overcome?" asked Mrs. Lupton, in sincere sympathy.

"He covered his face with his hands, and turning his cheek to the pillow, lay still for a little while. Then, hearing the sobs I could not repress, he looked at me, his eyes full of tears. All he said was—'My poor wife!' His first thought was of me! And to think how nearly I had lost *him* too!"

Her voice faltered; the tears rushed forth. She arose and went into the house.

CHAPTER VI.

THE season at Martin's had not opened, only begun to show signs of budding.

Martin's bears another name now. At the date of this chapter, it was the key of the Lower Saranac; a long, ugly, white house, cheaply built and plainly furnished. In the broad archway separating main building and right wing was set a view of blue water, and forest, and dappled azure-and-snow sky that elicited an exclamation of pleasure from one of the occupants of a buck-wagon driven down the stage-road on an afternoon in early May, 188—.

"Jolly picture—isn't it?" said a pale lad of fourteen to the tall man who held the reins. "And"—with an audible respiration—"how fresh the air tastes!"

"It is the best in the world!" answered the other. "It will make a new man of you in a few days. How do you do, Mr. Martin!" to the stalwart hotel-keeper and ex-guide, as he emerged from the side-door.

Stepping to the ground as he spoke, the traveller helped the boy down carefully.

"This is my brother, Master Gerald Lupton. He has had typhoid fever, and I have brought him to the woods to be made strong and well again."

"No better place, Mr. Lupton. No better place! I got your letter yesterday, and your rooms are ready.

Will you register before you go up?" turning into the office.

"Let *me* do it, Rex!" cried Gerald, eagerly.

He hurried to the counter, his ankles overlapping one another weakly. His brother's eyes lingered compassionately upon the fingers that could not hold a steady pen.

"The business-man of the firm—eh?" said the host, humoring the situation.

"Yes!"

The quiet reserve that distinguished his bearing toward the hotel-keeper from his manner to the invalid, yielded slightly to the smile accompanying the affirmative. But the smile was a grave one, and was gone entirely as, preceding Gerald and following the porter with the luggage, he mounted the uncarpeted stairs.

"Who is he?" asked a loiterer of a guide, also a loiterer. There were not twenty guests in the house, and each arrival was an event.

"Young Lupton 'o Freehold, Massachusetts-way. Middlin' rich 'n' thunderin' proud. 'S been here f' four year now, f' a week 'r two every summer. Cool, quiet feller, 'n' powerful unsocierbul. Ketches quite some fish though, 'n' Moody, 's guide, dooz say 's how he *ain't* so allfired stiff 's he looks. Ole man, he died, couple o' years back, 'n' lef' a big family 'n' this son guardeen to th' youngsters. Boy's one on 'em, seems. Kinder peakin-like, but we're use' to seein' 'em come in, that shape, up here."

Had the brothers glanced back at the turn of the stairs, they might have seen a lady walking up the

slight incline leading from the hotel to the water's edge. Pausing on the threshold of the office to wave her hand to her late oarsman, a slender youth who was pulling boldly back up the lake, she caught the words, "Freehold, Massachusetts." With a bow and smile to loiterers and host, she passed on to the counter to examine the register.

"*Some* new arrivals!" observed Mr. Martin, complacently.

"So I see!"

She turned a leaf—another—three or four together, her face bent low over the book.

"How's things at the camp gittin' on? Break, to-morrow, don't they?"

"Yes, and go on up to Amperzand."

Tone and smile were mechanical. She had reached the stair-foot when the voice of the host arrested her.

"Mrs. Phelps! you've left your bag!"

She had laid down a reticule from which protruded long, ivory knitting-needles, while inspecting the register. The light from the door showed her features distinctly as she received it from Mr. Martin's hand. She was very pale, the smile that thanked him was a forced gleam.

"You look clean tuckered out!" remarked the ex-guide. "Wouldn't you like to have a drop o' tea sent up to your room? The sun's been too much for you, I guess. That boy o' yourn had oughter take better care o' you."

He accounted her "a real born lady." She handled an oar as well as her son, and caught as many trout as her husband, with whom angling was a passion.

She had made friends with the women in the cabins, and knew the names of all the children. The region had brightened with her coming.

"You are very good, Mr. Martin! I need nothing but rest, thank you. The sun *is* hot for the season."

The stairs rose to meet her as she climbed them; the long, narrow passages billowed under her feet; her hand shook violently in fitting the key in her bedroom door. A rocking-chair stood by the window overlooking the lake. She sank into it and leaned her sick head against the wall, eyes closed and one limp hand dropped across the other in her lap.

The Phelpses had gone abroad in the August succeeding the railway accident. The great house on the hill had remained shut up ever since. For six years the family had sojourned in foreign lands, wintering in Algiers, Nice, Mentone,—whenever was promise of healing to the torn lungs and tonic for the nervous system. The party had been in the Adirondacks since the middle of April. Richard called himself well, but "meant to take the crude American climate by degrees." The Luptons knew of their landing in New York. The design of visiting the Lakes was suddenly formed and acted upon, and not communicated to them. Richard was an irregular correspondent always, and his wife seldom wrote to any one in Freehold. The ocean that had divided her from the fair inland town for all these years was but a type of the complete separateness of her present life from the careless security of existence between the blue hills which guarded it from the busier world.

In the semi-swoon that overtook her when safe

from observation, she was again on the columned portico, the river-breeze blowing over her face. The birds were chirping in the wistaria-branches ; Salome and Paul playing croquet on the lawn ; Rex Lupton was crossing the sun-warmed turf toward her, and Marion was singing low to herself in her chamber overhead. She tried to call the girl, to let her know of her lover's coming, and the effort brought the agony of recovered consciousness.

"Rex! Rex! Rex!"

This in a whispered groan, and then: "How can I meet him? how *can* I?"

The doughty "business-man of the firm" of brothers "thought he would stretch his legs on the bed for a minute and three-quarters."

"While you unpack your frills, you know," he said drowsily from the pillow.

With an amused, pitying gleam in his eyes, Rex laid a railway rug over the lax limbs of the sleeper, five minutes later. The boy had grown fast during his long illness; the pretty face was elfish in angles, and in precocity of intelligence. The pair had dined and rested for two hours at a wayside inn, but Gerald was, as he would have put it, "knocked out of time," by now. Postponing the unpacking of the "frills" to a more convenient season, Rex shut trunk and satchel, barred the shutters to temper the glare from the lake, and left the sleeper to the profound enjoyment of his "stretch."

The strait lanes of dormitory-passages were uncarpeted as yet, and his heels aroused sharply insistent echoes, rebounding from closed doors and dead walls

to lose themselves in cross-entries and up bare stairs. For all sign of human life astir in the upper stories, he and Gerald might be the only tenants of the caravanserai. A guide or two hung about the office; two old ladies rocked themselves on the piazza to a see-sawy accompaniment of gossip, delivered in humidly-husky tones ; a pug-dog lay asleep on a mat beside them. The wooden pier, extending along the water's edge, was deserted ; a dozen blue boats of the rakish Adirondack build were drawn up on the bank, like so many lazy marines, dabbling their toes in the ripple tossed inland by the breeze. Rex strolled along and off the plank walk into the grove beyond.

Warm puffs of balsamic breath met him before he gained the shadow of the outermost trees. The vandalism of "lumbering," that has robbed the northern forests of deciduous growth, has granted beneficent sweep to the health-bearing fragrance given out by the coniferous woods. A crooked pathway twisted among the resin-whitened boles; the foot sank in a carpet woven of the fallen brown needles of centuries ; the air was fraught with solace for tired nerves and laboring respiratory organs. Rustic seats were built against trunks and laid upon stumps, and Rex took possession of one, stretching out his long legs with a sigh like that with which his small brother had resigned himself to sleep.

He had altered as much as Gerald in six years. Care and thought had chiselled his features into more delicate outlines ; the responsibilities of manager and guardian had given decision to carriage and speech. The English cut of his beard made his face seem

longer and thinner than it really was; the neatly trimmed moustache drooped at the corners of a firm, well-cut mouth ; in his brown eyes lurked sadness and longings the tongue never told. As he leaned back on the rough bench, his head against the tree behind him, and gazed lakeward, twenty people would have seen, in passing, only a well-dressed, gentlemanly young fellow, taking his ease where ease-taking was the fashion. The twenty-first would have turned for a second and more intent look ; remembered face and attitude afterward with the indefinite expectation of learning something more of him, some day ; would have said, " He has a history, past or to come," and the one-and-twentieth person would have been a woman.

The balsam-fir has a murmur of its own when a breath of air is stirring, lighter than the legato threnody of the pine, and brisker in measure,—music that runs in cadenzas from one bough to another, and is, in a faint breeze, hardly more than a sibilant tremolo. In the deeper heart of the grove where Rex Lupton sat, the stiff twigs did not move, yet the whispering went on overhead ; the freshening waves of resinous sweetness seemed to come from gently-jarred censers. The lap of the water on the bank, the swishing gurgle with which it fell back, supplied the lower notes in the May-day *opus*. The boughs had been trimmed so as to leave each tree-bole bare for six or eight feet from the ground, allowing air and light free entrance. Through these openings the gazer saw a series of cabinet-pictures of wooded shore and island, and purple kingly heads reared against skies of melt-

ing blue; of a lake like a sapphire for clearness of color, with pearly and opaline reflections from cloudlets far up in the zenith.

"Take care! Don't move as you value your life!"

Rex thought he must have fallen asleep, so startling was the interruption of his reverie. The voice was a woman's, and, surprised as he was, he had the presence of mind to recognize something familiar in it. Instinct, rather than thought, held him perfectly still for the second in which he believed the admonition to be addressed to him. The next sentence undeceived him:

"Don't breathe if you can help it! Laughter would be rank blasphemy. I am just getting the *loveliest* polish on your finger-nails!"

The unseen auditor pulled himself to an upright sitting posture, and espied on the other side of a clump of shrubs, four or five yards away, two girls. The back of one was toward him; she held a sketch-book on her knee, and was painting with the free motion of a skilled artist. An open color-box and glass of water were on a stump at her elbow. Her companion sat on the ground in profile to the young man. Like the sketcher, she wore the woodland costume of navy-blue flannel, in her case fitted over the body of a very fat young woman. Her chin was a double roll, into which the rosy cheeks sank with never a break of shadow or cross-line. Bust and shoulders were divided from what should have been a graceful neck by a deep crease; her sleeves were like full bags, folded once at the elbow; her feet, clad in tennis-shoes,

stuck out straight in front of her. Her expression was pleasing and intelligent; her masses of blonde hair, delicate features, and lively blue eyes would have won her the title of beauty but for the redundance of adipose tissue. That she should sit for her likeness, and in such an attitude, was ridiculous. That a friend should make a picture of her in the merry mood indicated by her talk, was nothing short of unkindness.

"Once upon a time,"—resumed the artist, with an original punctuation-system, regulated by dabs and sweeps of the wet brush,—"*Ages* ago! When I could not have been. Much more than. Ten or eleven years old. I browsed. As freely in my father's library as Mary's little lamb. In the school-house yard. While he 'lingered near'. And I read a story. A trashy thing in a trashy magazine. Of a young painter. One of the prodigies that have had no instruction. And revel in the misfortune. Who made fame. *And* fortune. By exhibiting his first picture called "The Maiden's Hand." His Dulcinea. A bond-girl, who swept floors and churned. And washed dishes, without a mop. Shared fortune, and didn't care for fame. Probably, the cleverest stroke in *my* sketch"—brush suspended in the air, and head on one side to admire the effect—"is that slant of sunlight on your ring-finger. If you had worn anything but that big ruby set in diamonds I should have lost the one ray of warmth in my study in green-and-white. No! don't look at your hand! The human frame is so nicely adjusted that one cannot turn the head with affecting the equilibrium of every nerve, the tension of every muscle."

She worked on in silence for several minutes. was,doubtless, in a similar pause that the eavesdropper had gained his retreat without seeing or hearing the couple, himself unobserved. Were he to withdraw now, a rustling bough or cracking twig would certainly betray him, yet he ran the risk of greater embarrassment by remaining. When the sketcher should begin to speak again, he would escape with as little noise as possible. No harm could come from looking, meanwhile, at the fat model and at the turn of the painter's neck and arm.

She was rather above the middle height, round and supple in figure; her head sat well upon her neck, her brown hair—almost black in the shade—had golden-red streaks running over and hiding in the ripples where the sun kissed it. Her hands were brown and slender and looked strong. Her voice was fresh and pure, her enunciation remarkable distinct, and the impression of familiarity with its intonations grew upon him as he listened. She could not be a Southerner, for she honored each vowel, and slurred no two words into one, yet the lingering downward cadence on the final words of some sentences, and the quality of tone, were not Northern. He perceived now her subject to be the exceedingly pretty hand of her companion, sunken lightly in the rich green mosses of a low stump at the fat girl's side. The blue flannel sleeve was rolled back, displaying a white round wrist, smaller than one might have expected from the dumpy arm. The easy pose of the pink-tipped fingers, the curve of the wrist, the trail of a small-leaved vine across the mossy cushion, were artistically arranged.

"You are a model of patience, and a patient model," began the voice again, "just a dozen strokes more, my dear, and I will release you. If your mother likes the picture, I shall do myself. The great pleasure. Of making a copy in oils and sending it to her on her next birthday. *Basta!* A thousand thanks!"

She stepped forward to give a hand to the sitter, who, cramped by remaining so long in one position, made a futile scramble to rise. The artist's skirt touched the tumbler of water. It struck, capsized, and deluged the color box. With instinctive gallantry Rex sprang to the rescue; paint-tubes and pans bestrewed the loose fir-needles; all were wet, and the finger-tips of the trio were bedaubed in gathering them up.

"Warranted moist colors!" laughed the owner, blushing rosily, in receiving them from the stranger's hand. "You are very kind, and I was inexcusably clumsy. That is the last, I am sure, thank you! I beg that you will not give yourself further trouble!"

She said "tr-o-u-ble," with a falling inflection on the first syllable. Raising her eyes to his face, a change passed over hers, her eyes dilated in childlike amazement, her blush was more vivid.

"Oh! are you—I beg your pardon—but I fancy that I recognize in you an acquaintance—a very old friend! Are you not Mr. Reginald Lupton?"

Rex bowed low, and stood with his hat in his hand, puzzled and pleased.

"That is my name, certainly! And—you?"

"I knew it! I knew you at once," an agitated

wave of delight breaking up the accents she would have had merely cordial. "Have you forgotten Salome Phelps?"

The begrimed hands met in a hearty clasp; the brown eyes searched the dark-gray orbs and happy face for likeness of the immature girl who had wept in his arms at their parting six years before.

"I know now that your voice reminded me of your mother's. She is with you, of course?"

"Yes; that is, she and I are staying at the hotel while my father and brother are in camp about ten miles up the lake. She went up this morning to spend the day with them, and will be back this evening, Anna! Miss Marcy! I want you to know the best friend a little girl ever had—Mr. Lupton—whom I have not seen since I *was* a little girl."

Miss Marcy showed the tact of a genuine lady in busying herself with arranging paints and brushes in the box, while the old acquaintances seated themselves on a bench hard by for a catechetical talk. She wandered away presently, by degrees, reappearing with a tumbler of clean water in which she invited Salome to dip her fingers, producing a clean pocket-handkerchief for drying them. The improvised finger-bowl and napkin were then offered to Rex.

"You know the old superstition about washing hands in the same basin?" he said, rising to accept the service.

"I'll risk it!" smiled Salome. "If we quarrel, it will be for the first time. How good you used to be to the graceless hoyden I know myself to have been!"

'Never graceless or hoydenish. Your mother's

daughter could not be either. Has she changed in appearance or manner?"

"No—unless that she has grown handsomer and dearer and more charming every day. Ask Miss Marcy if she is not all that I say—and more. She has a bewitching mother of her own, and can the better judge of mine."

"I have never met a lovelier woman than Mrs. Phelps," Miss Marcy said with evident sincerity.

Her voice was sweet; her animated face and cordial self-possession made one wish she were seven or eight stone lighter.

"If you once knew her well, you do not need my testimony to that effect," she went on to Rex, willing to improve the acquaintanceship.

"There was a time when I knew no one better."

The instant gravity of tone and countenance, the slight bend of the uncovered head, were tributes to a venerated past of which one auditor was, presumably, ignorant, and of which the other could not speak. To cover the trifling embarrassment, Salome put a question:

"Is your mother—Mrs. Lupton—as beautiful as ever?"

"If the adjective were ever applicable to her, it is still. She is plumper, perhaps, but looks the better for it. There is little alteration in other respects."

"I used to think her the embodiment of graciousness and beauty!" Salome linked her hands on her knee and gazed retrospectively at the horizon. "Many a time I have pretended to be absorbed in a book, sitting at an angle that kept me out of her eye-range

and her within mine, for the pure pleasure of staring at her, unrebuked. And her voice! It was liquid melody, like the run of a warm, brown brook over smooth sand. Oh, you needn't laugh, Anna! You will grow poetic or bathetic (why not 'bathetic' as well as 'pathetic'?) when you meet her."

"I have had that pleasure," rejoined Miss Marcy, unexpectedly. "I spent a few days in Freehold, three years ago this summer. My cousin lives there. I was introduced to Mrs. Lupton at a pic-nic."

"Have you visited every inch of the habitable globe?" demanded Salome, with humorous vexation. "She should be exhibited as a prize specimen of the *Viatrix Americana*, Mr. Lupton. We found her first on the *Mer de Glace*, just half-way across, chatting comfortably with one guide in German and another in French, and nibbling black bread and Swiss cheese on the edge of a crevasse that gaped all the way down to Hoang Ho. We were travelling-companions for three months and have been friends ever since. For four days we have been inseparable here, where there is nobody but ourselves to talk with, and she has never intimated to me that she ever so much as *heard* of Freehold!"

"Because we have been so busy talking of other things," Miss Marcy pleaded. "And I know comparatively little of the place from personal observation. My favorite cousin married Rev. Rufus Lee of the North Hill church, Mr. Lupton. You may have met him?"

"I have, once or twice. I know him well by repu-

tation, of course. I hope you liked us well enough to repeat your visit? "

Salome took up the word :

"She is coming to pay me a long visit as soon as we are settled! She doesn't know it, but it is a fixed fact. I haven't had time to tell you, Mr. Lupton, that papa has quite made up his mind to go into permanent quarters under his ancestral roof-tree as soon as the place can be made ready for us. Paul enters Yale in October. That is one of our reasons for settling again in New England. Mamma looks a little dubious when the possible effect of the climate upon papa's newly-regained health is discussed, but we all guess what her choice would be. She always liked Freehold. I recollect it as fairer than Damascus. It is the Eden of my dreams of by-gone days."

"I am very glad to hear this!" said Rex, earnestly. "I shall dare to look at the old house again as I pass by. The closed doors and shutters have given it a blank, melancholy air inexpressibly mournful. Isabel says it reminds her of blind Bartimeus calling for mercy at the wayside."

"That sounds like her! How you would revel in her society, Anna! She says the most original things in the quietest tone, yet as nobody else could."

Her determination to include her friend within their conversational bounds was amiable and well-bred.

Perceiving it, Rex seconded her.

"Miss Phelps naturally views Freehold and Freehold people through rose-colored glasses," he said. "Do you recollect—" to Salome—"telling me once

that you 'regarded our valley with reverence as the cradle of your race?'"

"Did I ever say anything so melodramatic? I have the grace to blush for it now, as for my absurd pride in the antiquity of that same race of worthy farmers. One learns, in really ancient lands, to regard as modern anything under five centuries old. A pedigree that can be definitely traced but a hundred-and-fifty years back, is no more respectable in point of age than a mushroom."

Her gay, girlish rattle had a singular charm for the serious man who had no skill in badinage, and with whom few were tempted to use it. Isabel amused him, but her pleasantries had always a smack of quassia and cloves. Since Marion's death, he had mingled so little in general society as not to know how most women talk. At the solicitation of his step-mother he had gone to several parties within the past year. Freehold girls vowed that his stately courtesy made them as uncomfortable as the far-off eyes and faint smile that brought to mind the hill-side grave, where the flowers were never allowed to fade. The most audacious belle of the season, signalized by what she styled "the resurrection of His Royal Highness," put on record the saying that she "would as lief flirt with Miss Bayard's memorial-pillar, as with her widower."

He looked like neither grave-stone nor widower, in replying to Salome's last sally:

"In Freehold, that would be treason."

"As would many other innocent remarks," broke in Miss Marcy. "From what I have seen and heard of

town and people, I should say that the community is sufficient unto itself in morals, manners and traditions."

"Anna! you horrify me!"

Salome's ringing laugh dispelled Rex's impulse of annoyance, almost before he confessed it to himself.

"We must teach her reverence for the oldest and prettiest town in the great Connecticut Valley," continued the girl, her face alive with fun. "She is from Cincinnati, one of those preposterously overgrown and aggressively-alive places that demoralize just taste for a snug, neat village-city, with a stout binding of insular prejudice all around it,—a sort of Lucy-Lockett's-pocket affair. She will like us as we deserve to be liked when she has spent a month or two in Eden. Don't *we* attend the North Hill Church, Mr. Lupton?"

"I am afraid not!" smiling at the form of the query. "The Phelps pew is in what is known as the West Side Church. There is a story to the effect that your great-grandfather led a colony of disaffected parishioners into secession from the "Old North Hill." The West Side has the reputation of being more aristocratic than the Mother-fold."

He checked himself, recollecting Miss Marcy's relations to the pastor.

"An' not nigh s' sound in p'int o' doctrine!" she interposed with nasal unction. "More worldly, every way! But no richer, mind you! If you count up 'n' down aour middle aisle, you'll find youself well up int' th' millions. Th' ole North Hill holds its own, middlin' well, Mr. Lupton!"

"Sacrilege! 'tolerable, and not to be endured!'"

cried Salome, between soft bursts of laughter. "You shall not caricature my neighbors, nor make me ashamed of the fact that my forbears were Freeholders, born and bred. My father has become somewhat cosmopolitanized by six years of exile, but he is staunch in his allegiance to his native State. What American does not glory in Massachusetts? The *Springfield Republican* has followed him over the world. He says it flavored his father's cup of coffee every morning from the day of its first issue, and that there is something amiss in the mental and physical constitution of the Connecticut Valley man who can get through the day without it. I am very vain of my Yankee blood."

"Massachusetts, Freehold, the *Springfield Republican*—or Cincinnati—might be proud of you, true, gallant soul!" Miss Marcy laid the back of the hand which was her chief beauty caressingly against the smooth brunette cheek. "Mr. Lupton, if I was rude, I beg your pardon!"

He arose and bowed.

"Reassure yourself, Miss Marcy! If apology is due, it is from me, not from you."

The red light thrown upon his face, as he arose, drew all eyes to the western heavens.

"We make a specialty of sunsets and moonrises in the Adirondacks," said Salome. "The exhibition this evening will be especially fine in honor of the latest arrivals. The best place for seeing it is from the pier."

They went back together, hurrying a little until they cleared the grove; then, sauntering fitfully, pausing every few steps to enjoy the illumination.

The farthest mountains were deep-purple, with dis-

tinct orange lines conventionalizing them against the burning sky. Golden rivers cleft the nearer green hills; every jutting rock and topmost bough was gilded, and cast ruddy shadows; the lake was banded with scarlet-and-gold, as Lake Leman and the Adriatic are crossed by the cooler prismatic tints. The ugly caravanserai sprawling along the bank was washed with purest pink; the flat, bare windows were quivering topazes, blazing back intolerable reflections of the flooding glory.

"Why! there is mamma!" ejaculated Salome, quickening her pace. "How did it happen that we did not see her boat pass?"

She stood on the piazza, awaiting them. Her gown was the white woollen stuff her husband liked to have her wear; every down-dropping fold of drapery was defined and suffused warmly by the western fires. Rex could have believed that but a night and a day had elapsed since he and Marion saw her standing thus, between the vine-wreathed pillars, as they drove up the hill for the last time.

"Mamma!" her daughter ran forward to say; "Whom do you think we have brought with us? Do you know him?"

The lady's voice was steady and full as of yore; the hand Rex—pale to the lips, and speechless—enfolded in both of his, did not shake; her look, if grave, was sweet. She could not meet him gayly, recollecting, as both did, the date and circumstances of their farewell, but her eyes were clear and kind.

"I should have known him anywhere and always. My dear Rex! you have given us a delightful surprise!"

CHAPTER VII.

A WEEK after the Luptons' arrival at Saranac Lake House, a party of six, including the guide, set out in a long-bodied, stout-springed "sundown," for an excursion to North Elba. Mrs. Marcy, as a confirmed invalid, could not undertake the jaunt, but insisted that her daughter should leave her for the day. Anna and Mrs. Phelps were on the middle seat, Gerald by the guide whom he regarded as his peculiar property. That Rex should be paired off with Salome was inevitable, and, the back seat over the wheel, being adjudged by the daughter as too rough for her mother, was the only one left to them. As the young man swung himself up after her, and settled the linen dust-robe over her lap, he thought the arrangement as agreeable as it had seemed convenient.

He liked the girl, who was nine years his junior, as men count time, and, in reality, thirty years younger. She was clever, affectionate, sincere, piquante, comely, —a goodly representative of the finest type of American womanhood. Yet the catalogued recommendations to the admiration of a reasonable man did not define what was her principal charm in his eyes. He had felt it at their first meeting in the grove, and it had grown upon him with every succeeding day. He believed it to be the likeness to the mother she idol-

ized—the friend he had loved and lost—and would never find again.

It would not have surprised him, with his experience of life's disappointments and changes, had the ideal he had cherished so long under the guise of this noble, tender matron, been shattered at their reunion. The years that had wrought the heart-broken boy into the steadfast man must have left their mark on her. Had she proved, to his cleared vision, a common-place, elderly dame, excellent in her way, and the way of fifty other good and educated wives and mothers, he would have been sorry, but in no wise shocked. She was all he remembered and believed her to be, and superadded was a calmer dignity of speech, gentler grace of thought and deed for others, that heightened respect, and would have quickened affection—had she allowed him to care for her in the filial fashion of earlier days.

He had hoarded so much to confide to her—her, only—in those six years of her absence! The bare fact of his father's sudden decease had been communicated to her, with the rest of the world. He had meant to describe what nobody else would ever know; how he had found him, sitting at his desk, stone-dead, on that May afternoon, a drift of apple-blossoms, blown by the west wind through the open window, in the little valley between the debit and credit pages of the big ledger. Rex had the same seat now, and for the rest of that year, had audited the accounts in the same book. He never took the chair or touched the ledger without reviewing the scene; never saw or smelled the blossoming orchard, stretching down to

the river behind the mills, that he did not sicken in the recollection of how the cream-pink petals were caught and heaped about the dead hand resting on the desk. He never spoke of the haunting horror. There was no temptation to tell it to any one on the hither side of the Atlantic, and it was not a thing to be written. He had loved one woman, and she was dead. He had had one friend to whom he was as a son, and she wrote to him twice, or, at most, three times a year. Of Isabel, he would have said that they were still on excellent terms. She had a clear business head, and he took counsel with her in matters pertaining to the estate, as he would with another man. At home, she made him luxuriously comfortable; trained the children, his wards by his father's will, to respect and like him, and infused into her old good-fellowship a becoming touch of deference and dependence.

He had been homesick and heartsick for his "real mother's" return, and she was but the friendliest of acquaintances to him! There was no lack, apparently, in her interest in him, or none upon which he could base an appeal. She encouraged him to talk of his home and business, of the children, and his method of playing parent and brother together; questioned him as to the changes in town and neighborhood; detailed her husband's plans for their home-going, and conferred with him as to needed restorations in the old house; discussed foreign travel and Paul's scholarship; Richard's good fortune in finding complete renovation of health where thousands sought it in vain. There was no limit to the number and

variety of topics on which she chatted well and fluently. And ever between them spread a film of ice he could not break or pass. The invisible lines of sympathy no longer connected soul with soul. Had his dear, dead past never been also hers, they might have spoken together as confidentially and fully as they did during the hours in which no third person was within hearing. He had not been able to mention Marion's name, although he had tried, once and again, to introduce it. Surely, if time had so mellowed the poignancy of grief for him that he would have found a mournful pleasure in conversing of her with one who had known and loved his darling better than any other human being, himself excepted, a brave, sensible woman like Mrs. Phelps ought not to shun the pain of such reminiscences.

Too loyal to blame her for his disappointment, and over-ready, in habitual self-depreciation, to conclude the fault to be in himself, he turned to the daughter for what he craved and did not get from the mother—womanly sympathy. Here, at least, was no ice to break. The sunny, sensitive face, raised to him in maidenly frankness ; the unabashed smile of welcome or response ; the fresh, unspoiled joyousness of her young life, were balm to the heart-pain very far down.

The day was gray, with no menace of storm ; a silvery gray—meditative, not brooding—that would have been sultriness in the low countries, and was, at this altitude, cool and cheering shadow. The ladies did not raise their parasols, and congratulated themselves on the sunlessness, as each hill-top revealed a

new and wider landscape of wood, valley, stream and mountain. The welcome veil of cloud lay high, overrising the loftiest peaks, subduing without obscuring the rugged features of a region that is harsh until grass and foliage are in greenest prime. Farming in a country where snow may be expected in ten months out of the twelve, is necessarily furtive and slovenly, the meagre crops being snatched, as it were, by stealth from the reluctant soil. The trail of the lumberer is over all ; stumps stand as exclamation-points of desolation on arid hill-tops, girdle—like fossilized octopi, their bodies turned inward, straggling, clutching arms outward—fields, thinly clothed with herbage.

It was a relief to eye and mind when the road plunged downward into glens, was crossed by foaming torrents, and edged with a dense growth of tamarack, balsam, and arbor-vitæ.

"I am thankful *they* are not valuable as timber," said Salome, taking in deep breaths of astringent sweetness. "Insignificance has its immunities and advantages. Take it all and in all," she resumed, after a moment of smiling musing, "I believe I would rather be a balsam-fir than an oak ! It is better to be good for nothing, but to be cheerful all the year 'round, to help weary people to rest, and sick people to get well, than to be built into houses, ships and railways. The mission of mediocrity is underrated in our world and day. It is a safe and beneficent mean to be neither great nor too small."

"The 'fresh-colored' boy in the Valley of Humiliation thought it safest to be so low down that he

could get no lower," said Mrs. Phelps, over her shoulder.

"I always despised that pious prig who made such vaunt of his patches and humility!" Miss Marcy commented, incisively. "I agree with Salome, that respectable mediocrity is the happiest state for man or woman. Not," with mock severity, "that I consider *her* qualified to speak on the subject!"

"Just what I was longing to say, and dared not!" rejoined Rex heartily, watching the clear crimson rise in the cheek next to him.

Salome shook her saucy head.

"You two shall not flatter me out of my evergreen nook! Remember—the axe is laid at the root of hardwood trees. I love peace, obscurity and long life. The thought of early death is terrible to me. It is violence done to Nature!"

Mrs. Phelps looked straight forward; Rex turned his head and gazed at the bank, black with leaf-loam, through which the road was cut. His gloved hand gripped the iron rail of his seat until it was numb. In dingle and on boulder, in brawling stream and gothic glade, he saw the beautiful, still face with the mysterious white light upon it, fairer by so much—oh, so much! than that of the younger living creature beside him! Had the same haunting thought silenced the child's mother? Then, ought not some perception of her sympathy to lessen the dull, hard anguish he should, by now, be used to bearing alone?

A joyful cry from Salome aroused him:

"Stop! please stop!" to the driver, "I caught

sight of trailing arbutus on the edge of the bank! I must have it!"

"My love!" protested her mother, "arbutus in bloom so late in May!"

"Hardly, I think!" said Rex. "Let me explore!"

She was upon the ground as soon as he, with one agile spring over the wheel, and ran swiftly back to the spot designated. Scaling the bank before he could reach her, she fell upon her knees and brushed aside fir-needles and twigs.

"I fancied that I smelled them before I saw them —the darlings!" she breathed in the subdued tone of intense delight, as the dainty pink cups and glossy leaves were exposed. "Think! I have not seen one before, since we left Freehold!"

The wagon waited at the foot of the long, steep hill, while the flower-seekers rambled in the forest, as completely secluded as if separated from the rest of the party by miles of woodland. The slender-stemmed tassels of the larches hung motionless; the hardy arbor-vitæ stood up stiff and still; only the balsams breathed in harmonious sighs, drowned by the rustling footsteps, the pluck of eager fingers, as cluster after cluster of blossoms peeped above the brown blanket.

"It would be robbery and waste to gather more!" the girl said, raising herself, at last her arms full. "How nearly we had passed them by! Is not this delicious?"

She buried her face in the flushed snow of the mass.

Rex Lupton was—said those who liked him and those

who did not, most decidedly of all himself—a man of mediocre ability and slow fancy. But he thought, as she stood there, her face a little uplifted, taking in with every sense the influences of the place, that the dark woods held her to their heart as they had sheltered the brave delicacy of the Mayflowers. The scent of balsam and cedar had some subtle associativeness with her high, loving spirit he could not define, but must feel forever thereafter.

Still, it was only as a gifted, interested and most winsome child that he thought of her, as he led her down the slope and put her back into the wagon. A dear child! so like the friend he could not win back that he found solace in being with her. A graceful child, who would develop into a fine woman some day, but could never be so glorious in beauty, so enchanting in variety of mood, so earnest in passion, so bewitching in frolic, as the girl whose name his lips never formed.

In merry and serious chat the hours slid by, until, at noon, they left the main road for a wooded lane, emerging from this into a sterile field, and saw beyond it a frame cabin set down, with a few mean outhouses, in the middle of the wilderness-farm. All were homely, unpainted, comfortless, the home in life—when he let himself have a home—of John Brown.

A rude fence enclosed his grave and a solitary gray boulder, with a step-ladder leaning against the taller side. A woman, in calico gown and sunbonnet to match, ran out at their approach. She had a key in her hand, and, without waiting for orders, applied it to a rusty padlock pendent from a wooden box

like a flattened bee-hive set upon the grave-head. Before lifting it, she held out a sallow wrinkled palm.

"Ten cents apiece, if you please!"

The guide explained:

"It hez to be kep' kivered up t' hender visitors from hackin' it to pieces, an' carryin' of it clean away."

Friends or foes had attacked it zealously before the precaution was taken. The edges were chipped and jagged; the dents and bruises left by ruthless hammers encroached upon the inscriptions which covered the upright slab from ground to crown.

"Somewhat the worse for the moths!" observed Gerald coolly, from his standpoint nearest the relic.

The reaction from the solemnity of the place and hour provoked a general laugh, and the petted boy read aloud the uppermost epitaph with laborious distinctness:

"'*In memory of Captⁱⁿ John Brown who died at New York Sept. ye* 3 1776 *in the* 42 *year of his Age.*'

"Who was *he?*" addressing the custodian with a look of utter simplicity.

"Father of the martered John Brown," she responded, in a sing-song tone. "The stun were brought here when the fam'ly moved from Masserchusitts."

"They were of an economical cast of mind," assented the boy in grave approval. "They turned the 'stun' inside out and used it for the rest of the 'fam'ly.' We often do that in Massachusetts."

"Gerald! none of that!"

Vexed with himself and the others for the unseemly merriment, Rex took hold of the boy's shoulder. Gerald twitched it away.

"One minute, old fellow! I want to pursue my historical and mortuary studies. Hello! here's a jolly go!

"'*John Brown, Born May* 9 1800, *was executed at Charleston, Virginia, Dec.* 2 1859.'

"Born *twenty-four* years after his father died! Oh! oh! oh!"

He threw himself on his back on the grass and roared.

The contagion was irresistible. The awesomeness of the desolate sublimity of the scene; the memories connected with the man who slept in the neglected grave; the horror of his violent death,—availed nothing against the exquisite ludicrousness of the climax. Mrs. Phelps's just sense of propriety gave way, and she leaned against the rock behind her, shaking with laughter, while Miss Marcy sank suddenly upon the grave, too weak to stand, and mirthful tears ran down Salome's cheeks. The very guide gave a surprised guffaw, and Rex could not command his voice, angry though he was. Only the woman and two slatternly girls, who had joined her from the house, looked on in stolid gravity.

In the first break in the laughter, the custodian's dry drawl was heard:

"Mrs. Brown herself tole me it were *his* father. Taint noways likely she would 'a' made a mistake. I don' see whatever you're a-laughin' at?"

Gerald sat up.

"Don't! *don't*! It's perfectly delicious as it is. Give her another half-dollar for unlocking the box, Rex! The joke is worth all of fifty dollars. By George! what a second-class job the thing is all around—John Brown first, John second, and the rest of it! No wonder his soul keeps 'marching on,' double quick! He can't afford to stop after starting twenty-four years too late."

Rex was serious enough now. With one stretch of his long arm he picked up the offender, and set him on his feet, giving him a little shake as he did it.

"We've had too much of this nonsense, Gerald! It is in wretched taste—leaving feeling out of the question—to crack bad jokes on a man over his grave. Especially when the man was one whom every patriot honors as a hero and a martyr. I am vexed and ashamed!—as much with myself as with you."

"And why—may I ask in the spirit of a common sensible inquirer—should John Brown be canonized as a hero-martyr?"

Miss Marcy put the question calmly, not pugnaciously, from her seat on the mound, looking up at the indignant brother with round, unwinking eyes.

Rex replied with unusual promptness. These abrupt queries had ceased to startle him.

"John Brown struck the first blow for the freedom of a race; a blow that aroused the nation to a sense of the sin of holding four millions of human souls in slavery. He fought for freedom against odds in Kansas; he laid down his life for freedom against more fearful odds. The most beneficent blunder ever made by a Christian government was his execution

at Charleston. We owe the abolition of our national crime to it."

"Suppose"—the girl began quietly—"that a conscientious Communist were to plan 'a general uprising' against capitalists, employers, and middlemen, a wholesale massacre of them and their families, *if necessary*, in order that their ill-gotten gains might be equitably distributed among those whose labor had earned them; that to carry this scheme into execution, the most degraded of our foreign population were armed, and instructed to be ready to resist the oppressors to the death,—*if necessary*. Suppose, further, that in an unsuccessful attempt to execute the design, half-a-dozen lives were lost, and the leaders of the enterprise were taken, red-handed. What punishment would the law and the community be likely to inflict?'

She spoke more deliberately, and with increasing gravity, as she went on, rising and gazing down at the grave as in arraignment of the occupant.

"I know it is the fashion to rank John Brown among martyred patriots. What advantage has he over my hypothetical Nihilist? He was old enough to have heard of the horrors of accomplished servile insurrection. In his pity for the slave, did he forget merciful thoughts of the planter's wife and babies? Philanthropists call his 'the best organized scheme for a general uprising of the negroes ever conceived by the brain of a hero who loved Freedom as he loved his GOD.' They regret that 'he failed because those he would have freed were not ready for action.' *Action!*' Do the men who say it understand what that 'action' would have been?"

Her auditors were motionless while the protest was entered. Rex and Salome were side by side at the foot of the mound. Gerald, released by his brother, had retreated to Mrs. Phelps's side; the guide put one foot on the hive-like wooden case, and his mouth pursed in a soundless whistle, stared at the defaced head-stone; the women and children gaped stupidly at "the fat lady-preacher," as one of them afterward designated her.

"The cases are hardly identical," said Rex slowly, and not easily. "Human slavery, legalized on American soil, was a hideous crime—a disease in the body politic. Appeal to law would have been useless. That had been tried. Nor do I believe that John Brown meditated a 'massacre.' He hoped that a simultaneous insurrection all over the Southern States would show slave-holders the folly of resistance, and intimidate them into making terms. He had a kind heart."

"The arguments to be addressed to the masters were muskets and pikes by the thousand. John Brown had fought slave-holders in Kansas. Did he imagine, for one instant, that they would surrender to their armed servants without striking a blow?—

"But I ask forgiveness of you all for forgetting myself so far as to discuss this matter. Mamma—gentle saint!—charged me to be discreet, and I have disobeyed her. *Peccavi!*"

She sat down on the lowest step of the ladder, and laid her forehead within her clasped hands.

Salome looked from one to another in piteousness of perplexity.

"*What* is one to think?" she said, trying to laugh, while she patted Anna's head reassuringly. "Mamma, you always pull crooked things straight! Who—and what—was John Brown?"

"A fanatic, crazed by grief, I hope, my daughter. I cannot reason further. My favorite sister, with her two little ones, lived within a mile of Harper's Ferry in 1859. For years I could not hear his name without a shudder. I leave him to the judgment of One who is all-wise and all-merciful. Gerald! you would like to see what is on the top of this rock, and so should I, if Miss Marcy will let us pass."

Anna held her back until the others had mounted, to throw her arms about her neck and whisper penitently: "I am sorry!"

"It is not as if he were alive to defend himself, my love," answered the lady, her eyes deep with strange pain. "God help and pardon us all!"

The sloping crown of the hoary rock had been chiselled to a smooth surface, and "John Brown, 1859," cut in deep capitals thereupon. From this point of observation, the forest-line bounded the cleared tract in every direction. Beyond and above it arose the eternal mountains upholding the silver-gray firmament. Where now heaved the low roll of turf, guarded by the battered granite slab, the bereaved father used to read his Bible on Sunday afternoons, and, remembering in what "cause" his son was "murdered at Ossawatomie, Kansas," in the prime of his young manhood, went mad while revolving a scheme that should secure that Cause's triumph.

This was Salome's merciful summing-up when, in the late afternoon, Rex recurred to the subject.

He had been constrained in look and manner since the discussion. The uneasy self-consciousness, evolved in the modern New Englander from the unsparing introspection of Puritan progenitors, writhed in the sense of defeat. His espousal of a sacred cause had been miserably weak; he was put at a disadvantage in eyes before which he longed to stand well.

"Isabel used to call me 'Reginald the Unready,'" he said to Salome. "A man whose command of language surpasses mine could have answered Miss Marcy's clever special pleading."

Mrs. Phelps and Anna chose the back seat on the homeward drive, and were now talking so earnestly there was no risk that the two in front would be overheard. Gerald was giving the good-natured guide valuable hints as to the management of the off-horse, which was coltish and impatient to get home.

"Politics and polemics are edged-tools in the family circle," answered Salome, in the guarded subtone Rex had used. "But this is so essentially a dead issue that discussion is utterly unprofitable. Anna's is a Southern family. It is natural she should feel and speak strongly of the 'John Brown Raid.' It is equally reasonable that you should hold adverse opinions. Poor John Brown! As mamma says, the charitable view of the quixotic enterprise is to believe that he was insane—at least, a monomaniac."

Then she reverted to the Kansas struggle, his losses, and his secluded life at North Elba.

"You have your mother's gift of healing!" smiled

her auditor; "and her large, sweet charity for the erring. Your resolutely happy temperament is from your father. You should be thankful for the combination."

"I am! Thankful and glad of any part of me that is mamma's, and grateful for the natural buoyancy of disposition that turns me always toward the light. But for papa's sanguine nature, we must have lost him years ago. I am looking forward impatiently to seeing him and Paul, day after to-morrow. Our family has been a unit for so long, that this fortnight of separation is a trial. Papa's protracted invalidism made him peculiarly dependent upon mamma, and now that he is well, he cannot break himself of the habit, he says."

"He would not if he could, I am sure. Dependence upon such a woman makes a man strong."

She turned to him with shining eyes.

"It does me *good* through and through, to hear you talk of her! Everybody likes and admires her, of course, but comparatively few really *know* her—how tender, how patient, how heroic she is! I cannot remember when she was not my guardian angel, yet I seem never to have appreciated certain phases of her character until within the last three years. We are very intimate—mamma and I!" with happy complacency, amusing yet pretty.

"I have never known another family so united and happy as yours. Except for your father's illness and — and — the accompanying disasters — your lot has been all brightness."

It was growing dark in the defile they were enter-

ing; the forest-depths were black; the dashes of vivid color in the evening sky directly above them where the boughs did not meet, were sudden and blinding. Miss Marcy was relating an incident of Alpine travel to her friend, graphically, but not loudly; the young horse was prancing and sidling at the streaks of light barring the road at intervals.

"Yes, *sir!*" Gerald was enunciating; "what the rascal wants is a chain-curb, one of the kind that will cut his tongue in two, if he doesn't come right in on the rein!"

Salome did not speak again until they were near the lighter hill-top.

"That one great sorrow left its trace for all time upon my dear mother's heart," she said, with tremulous feeling, lowering her voice still more. "She speaks of it to no one—not even to me. Child-like, I used to resent reserve I felt to be almost unkind, for I loved the lost one passionately. She was the only sister I ever had, you know. Once I broke out impatiently to papa. We were visiting the Uffizzi Gallery in Florence, and I fancied that I detected a resemblance to *her* in the Madonna Addolarata of Sassoferrato, and asked mamma, timidly, 'if she thought it like any one she had ever known?' She scarcely glanced at it, and saying, carelessly, 'You are fanciful on some subjects, my dear,' walked away. Papa put his arm about me when he saw that I was choking back the tears, and said: 'I see what you mean, little girl, and so does mamma, but she cannot trust herself to talk of her friend. It is the case

with many deep-hearted people. Don't pain her by referring to the subject again.' "

"I am more grateful to you than I can express for telling me this," returned Rex, agitated and fervent. "I, too, have been in danger of misjudging her. What is the matter, Bryant?"

The wagon had come to a halt in another deeply sunken pass; the horses were plunging excitedly. The driver stood up to peer into the gloom.

"A thunderin' big hemlock limb hez tumbled over in th' road—most clear acrost it. But there's room to pass, I guess. Get up!"

As Rex half-arose to look past Gerald's shoulder at the dim, shapeless heap filling up the ravine, the driver touched the team with the whip, and the young horse shied violently, driving the wheels on the left side upon a jutting rock. The vehicle careened, and shot four of the occupants out into the highway—righted at the frantic leap of the frightened animals, and was out of sight in the twilight distance before the fallen travellers picked themselves up.

Rex and Bryant were thrown into the middle of the road, which was, luckily, soft and damp at that spot. Mrs. Phelps and Miss Marcy had slid into the thickest part of the bushy branch that had caused the disaster. While the guide tugged valiantly to extricate the younger lady, Rex laid hold of Mrs. Phelps and helped her to her feet.

"I hope to heaven you are not hurt!"

"No! no! but my child, Rex! my child!"

Rescue and exchange of sentences passed so quickly that the clatter of the hoofs, the whirr of wheels

were still audible when both men sprang forward in pursuit. They spent no breath in words. The thud of feet, the hoarse, hurried pant, as of a dog on the chase, told each that the other was at his side. They ran like deer, but clatter and rush died away to their strained ears before they had gone a hundred yards. The hush of a forest night where song-birds do not build settled through the vast woodlands on either side ; to the starting eyes fixed in one direction, the gloom was a thickening, swaying curtain, falling lower and nearer with each bound of the wearying limbs.

"It's no use killin' ourselves!" the guide pulled up to say. "We can't overtake 'em nohow, with them devilish horses on the jump. We'll walk on 'till we come up with a house, or folks—or somethin'! If so be anything's goin' to happen them two, it's happened by this time—Lord help 'em!"

"For heaven's sake, hold your tongue!" in the keen high key of intensest excitement. "It cannot be! it *shall* not be!"

He began to run again, but with feet that caught on the uneven ground ; livid streaks flashed before his sight ; his heart beat like an unbalanced trip-hammer ; each throb hurt his lungs cruelly. Though he died for it, he could not stop. Bryant called after him, but he held on. No matter what lay at the end of the race, he must reach it, or go mad. The guide shouted again, and a shrill echo repeated the call ; a third time, and the same echo responded,—now nearer, with an effect so peculiar that the distracted man involuntarily slackened his pace. "Hallo-o-o!"

came from behind him, and, "Ahoy! ahoy!" from before.

It was Gerald's voice, and following upon his reedy falsetto came a woman's call—clear, vibrant, sweet,—filling Rex's ears, the woods, his world, with pealing music. He stopped, spent and weak, tottering back against Bryant, as he reached him.

"Bear up, sir, bear up for the Lord's sake! It's them, safe an' soun', sure's shootin'! But where in thunder did they scare up a light?"

For a glimmer, like a fallen star, pierced the darkness far down the road, swinging, in nearing them. As they hastened onward to meet it, they distinguished two figures.

"Halloo! there they are!" shouted Gerald. "We're all right!"

"Mamma!" cried Salome. "Oh, Mr. Lupton! where is mamma?"

"Safe! safe! my—"

Long habitual repression shut back the word. But he did take the trembling hands in his that were no steadier, and drew her to his side.

"All are safe! quite safe!" he repeated. "Thank God that you are not hurt! Lean on me!" as he felt her shake with sobs of overwrought emotion. "Sit here!" leading her to a fallen tree made visible by the lantern. "Bryant will get back to her sooner than you could."

"I'll run on with my lantern!" volunteered Gerald, talking loudly and fast in the self-importance of heroship. "I had just crawled under the seat to look for it. I knew we could get around that blamed tree

better if the horses could see what it was, you know—when we tipped over. And when the old caboose righted, there I had stuck, wedged in, you know, in the bottom, and Salome had hung fast to the railing of the seat, and there we were, sir, bound for kingdom-come at a 2:40 rate! Salome recollected, as quick as wink, the heavy, wet, sandy stretch at the foot of the hill where you stopped for arbutus, you know, and passed the word to me to be ready to light out, when the brutes slowed up there, as they would certainly have to do. When we had jumped [illegible] found I had hung on to the glim through everything, you know, and I had matches in my pocket. So we fired up, and came back to look up the rest of the party. Come, Bryant! Take care of her until we get back, Rex. She's a brick!"

Salome began to laugh, as the two moved off.

"That dear, absurd boy!"

"Don't try to talk, dear child! Rest, instead!"

"You are sure mamma is not hurt! You would not deceive me, Mr. Rex!"

"I have told you the truth."

They sat side by side, in the dense darkness shutting down about them with the withdrawal of the lantern, and when he had told her, in as few words as possible, the manner of her mother's and friends' escape, neither offered to speak. Shaken and weak, now that the necessity of movement was over, and suspense had made way for the blessed certainty that her mother was alive and safe, Salome linked her hands upon a projecting branch of the prostrate trunk and rested

her head upon them, too happy to think, or wish, or be impatient.

Gazing up at the stars glimpsed through the gaps where the foliage did not join over the highway, Rex returned thanks in his voiceless way for the salvation of the young life, as full of thrilling possibilities as had been that of another woman, as beloved and more fair, more richly endowed by nature and by fortune, whom Fate—or Providence—had not spared, six years ago.

CHAPTER VIII.

RICHARD PHELPS and his son had broken camp on Amperzand three days before his wife and daughter left Martin's to rejoin them. For three nights Salome had ceased to look out as soon as it was really dark, for the glimmer of the double watch-fire kindled on the mountain, which was the preconcerted signal to the two left behind. The camping party had moved onward through Round Lake, *via* Bartlett's, to the Upper Saranac, whipping every promising trout-stream on the route. The rendezvous on Saturday afternoon was to be Bartlett's. The Marcys would remain a week longer at Martin's, awaiting the arrival of the husband and father from the west. Ten days later they hoped to rejoin their friends at Paul Smith's.

There was no shadow of parting to overcast the spirits of the four voyagers who stepped gayly into the boats laid at the sloping wharf on the finest of May mornings. The brothers separated by mutual consent. Gerald found in Mrs. Phelps an ever indulgent listener to stories of escapade and exploit.

"She's as jolly as a fellow, every time!" he confided to his amused room-mate. "Knows Freehold like a book; remembers everybody—name and history. Talking with her is all plain sailing, you see. No tacking to explain who is who, and what is what.

Then, having a boy of her own, she understands what a fellow really likes to hear and talk about. So, if you don't mind, I should like to go in her boat."

Rex repeated the speech with relish to Salome as they faced each other in the blue-bodied boat, sweeping right onward between an island, robed to the lake-edge with grayish-green ferns, on their right, and the wooded mainland on the left.

"What an audacious, vivacious 'fellow' *he* is!" she answered, eyeing the lithe figure in loose sailor attire, alert in every turn and glance, now coaxing Bryant into letting him take an oar in the boat not twenty yards away from them. "Will you let me remark upon your judicious management of him?"

Rex colored slightly.

"You are good to say it. Frankly, though, he ought not to be in my charge. We are too unlike not to differ sharply at times. But the children are a trust I cannot shirk."

"You are young to have such laid upon you."

"I am twenty-nine. That sounds patriarchal, does it not?"

"Oh, no! Papa is forty-one, with the complexion, eyes, and spirits of a boy. You look very much as you did at twenty-three. Only—sometimes—it seems a pity!"

She said it thoughtfully, trailing her bare hand over the guards in the lake, her tone hardly louder than the ripple between her fingers.

Rex waited a minute for her to go on.

"What is a pity?" he asked, gently bending toward her, until his eyes drew hers from the water.

She looked surprised, but not confused, at the intentness of his gaze.

"I should not say it, perhaps, for you, of all men, appear to me to have been made to walk and stand without others' help; but I am sorry for any one who has had no youth. There is violence in the imposition of untimely care upon those who are yet in the morning of life."

"Is a belated spring always a lost season?"

"By no means. On the contrary, there is less danger of frost-killed blossoms and fruit."

"There is then hope for me still, you think?"

A little lift of the eyebrows emphasized the reply.

"Hope? Who could have more?—or fairer opportunities of duty, and duty's reward? Taking springtime as the season of promise, you should not complain. Without dipping into homiletics, we may take it for granted that work for others' good is the highest form of human enterprise. Then—*you* ought to be satisfied!"

"Satisfied!" He drew in a deep breath of sun-warmed air, crisped by resinous fragrance, and some spiritual tension relaxed with the wave of sensuous pleasure passing over him. He had walked all his life-time subject to bondage. Neither mind nor heart had fed and grown freely. His world was narrow; his restrictions were many. However enviable his lot might appear to others, he knew himself to be hungry and frozen.

In Freehold, where he was best known, nobody "took to him"—in provincial phrase. His stepmother was a business partner and agreeable acquaint-

ance. "The children" obeyed him as a guardian, and tolerated his unskilful efforts to enter into their pursuits and feelings. Behind his back they mimicked his sober face and stiff phrases. He had overheard them at it once, and been angered, where most men would have been diverted by the monkeys. If this frank, fearless girl had known Freehold people and his reputation there, would she be constrained in his society, or despise him, as he despised himself, for not asserting his individuality—for his apparent content in the rôle of "the son of his father"? People thus nicknamed him, and he knew that, too. He was glad that he had her for these ten days to himself, unbiased by the tradition of his antecedents which hampered him at home like swaddling bands.

But, to be "satisfied"? That would mean to look forward as well as backward; to have a home and life, of which he could say, "This is *mine*—to have, to hold, to enjoy!"

The smart blue-and-white-shirted guide who had the young people in charge was so much the better oarsman than amateur Gerald, that by the time they reached the narrower upper waters of the lake, they had left him and his passengers out of sight. Salome lay back in the chair-seat fitted in the stern, in silent ecstacy of enjoyment. The boat swept, without sway or swash, through the warm, smiling waters, dimpling at the dalliance of the oars; the sunshine shimmered through azure gauze upon the young foliage of birches, showing like pale-green mist among firs and pines; upon the pink leafage of shoots springing up from the roots of felled oaks. At

rare intervals, the tassels of a maple surprised the eye with a gleam of crimson, and rotting logs thrust blotches of brilliant ochre over the brown shallows lapping the bank. Balsamic breaths crossed and flowed with the woody aroma of tender sprouts. Right ahead, Amperzand, White face, Bald Mountain and Marcy, in corslet, baldric and helmet of blue-and-silver, were ranged to guard the Eden of woods and waters. Beyond them, a chain of fainter peaks was "folden in distance and in dream."

Unconsciously, the girl began, by-and-by, to croon to herself a simple melody Rex had never heard before, but which went went well with the scarcely audible rhythm of the oars and soft throb of the waves, as they were parted by the prow. The murmur took words in the refrain, as ripples might be accentuated by the turn of the boat to right or left,

> "And the flowing tide comes in!
> And the flowing tide comes in!"

"Sing it—please!"

The request was hardly more than a breath, yet the songstress started and blushed.

"I did not know that I was humming it! I was *thinking* a little ballad that papa likes to have mamma sing. You know it too—do you?

"I have no doubt of it! I can tell you certainly when you have granted my petition. It must be impossible for any one who *can* sing, not to do it here, and to-day I, who have neither ear nor voice, must have burst into song if you had not. You do not

know—I hope you never may !—what your involuntary 'humming' has averted."

The boatman grinned. Salome, catching his eye, laughed, and without further demur began her song:

"He sailed away at break of day,
The skies were blue and fair,
He kissed his bonnie hand to me,
With heart as light as air.
'Hark ye!' he cried, 'go watch the tide
As it cometh up to Lynn;
For, foul or fair, I will be there
When the flowing tide comes in!'

I watched the clouds, that came in crowds,
Like flocks of evil birds;
My heart sank low with bitter woe,
Remembering Donald's words.
'O GOD!' I cried, and none beside
Knew the grief my heart within—
'Oh! give me back my bonnie lad,
When the flowing tide comes in!'

Across the strand, far up the land,
The fierce, wild waters swept;
Laid at my feet a burden sweet,
With smile as if he slept.
I could not weep, so soft his sleep,
For fear 'twould waken him—
Peace! let him rest! God knoweth best!
And the flowing tide comes in!"

The fresh, tender voice bore the strain over the dimpling lake into the listening forest; cliff and crag brought it back faint and fitful, but tunefully pathetic still:

"Peace! let him rest! God knoweth best!
And the flowing tide comes in!
And the flowing tide comes in!"

The boatman drew his shirt-sleeve across his eyes ; the muscles in Rex's throat knotted so tightly that he could utter nothing for a minute, beyond a husky "Thank you."

"I wish you could hear mamma sing it," remarked Salome, modestly apologetic, as the pause began to be awkward. "Papa insisted that she should give it to us on the Grand Lagoon in Venice, one night, when there was a full moon, and no other gondola was near us. I am not ashamed to say that I could not see the moon for tears. Papa says 'When the Flowing Tide Comes in,' makes a baby of him, when mamma sings it."

Let their conversation begin where it would, it always swung around to "mamma." Rex, with no sense of the humor of the fact, followed the daughter's lead now :

"Musically considered, I am a deaf blockhead, as I have confessed. But there are voices that have found their way to my soul, through some avenue. Hers did, and yours does. It is not a compliment, perhaps, to say this after such a preface. When I get up a neat thing I always make a *fiasco* of it ! I recollect well how I used to love to listen to Mrs. Phelps's singing, and that she improvised words and music—"

He broke off abruptly on a rising inflection. Their startled eyes met.

The writer of this chronicle recalls how, a quarter-century ago, in the stormy "war times," she strolled, one cloudless January morning, with a company of friends through the Patent Office in Washington, and,

in the long line of recesses in a large hall, came upon one screened by a white curtain. With merry chat of mystery and feminine curiosity, the foremost of the gay party drew aside the hangings, and fell back aghast, at sight of a dead soldier on a bier, awaiting transportation to his Northern home!

Such shock and recoil were in the faces that confronted one another in the filtered sunlight of this Adirondack day. Almost before Salome could note the reflection of her emotion in Rex's countenance, it passed before a great, solemn calm. His eyes gleamed and softened,—a grave sweetness, more reassuring than a smile, moved his mouth. He put out his hand, careless of the guide's presence.

"We have much in common," he said. "We ought to be friends for a life-time!"

The girl's honest simplicity told in the heartiness with which she met hand and speech:

"We could never be anything else, Mr. Rex!"

"That is ever so much more natural than your later trick of calling me 'Mr. Lupton'! Some day, we must have a long, free talk of that by-gone time. That is, if I can bear my part in it. Reticence, long maintained, makes expression difficult and painful. It would do me good in every way, if I could creep out of my shell. All New Englanders wear them, but some shell-fish are more lively than others."

"Anna classifies us as Crustacea, I know," interpreting his design of turning the dialogue into less confidential channels. "I am loth to believe that warm-blooded animals can live nowhere except at the South and West."

They kept away from delicate ground after that. The Phelpses were good talkers, and their years of travel had given the daughter longer and more varied views of men and things than most girls have at her age. Utterly destitute of affectation and petty love of shining, she was more bent upon entertaining her escort than having what the American girl covets as "a good time." Her chat of travel, historical associations, foreign social habits, ethics, even the politics of older lands—was an easy, sparkling flow that would have done honor to the queen of a salon,—or so thought her educated listener. The guide dipped the oars more softly, his eyes set on the animated face, drinking in all that he could comprehend, and loyally admiring what he could not.

Meanwhile, the lake widened, and narrowed again in the lee of a mighty rock; the channel grew tortuous and more rapid; shallows choked with lily-pads and rushes, encroaching upon it; at every second beat an oar brought up a tangle of roots and grasses.

"You'll land her before we shoot the rapids?" interposed the guide, without preamble, swinging the boat around to shore with a strong, bold pull on the right oar.

"Here, already!" with the air of one aroused from a dream. "You have rowed well! Certainly we will get out!"

He stepped upon the broad, flat rock by which the boat lay quivering under the oarsman's hold, like a hound on the leash, and assisted Salome to land.

With a bound and a curvet, throwing up her head madly, then darting downward as a swallow skims the

water, the skiff flung herself through the shute, swirl and spray of the Raquette Falls, and lay rocking on the placid surface beyond.

"Well done!" pronounced Rex, to whom the exploit was not a new sight, although Salome caught her breath excitedly. Then, to her,—"We will wait here for the other boat. You may like to walk about after sitting so long. This is the shortest 'carry' in the chain of lakes. Indeed, it hardly deserves the name, as even transportation-boats usually shoot the rapids."

White and rosy and buff blossoms, the names of which they did not know, studded damp, deep mosses growing upon rocks warmed by the sun. On the grass under a thorn-bush, they found a last year's birds' nest. Coarse gray moss covered a frame of woven grass, finer mosses lined it. Salome sat on a rock, Rex standing by her, while she filled the nest with flowers, interspersed with the woolly crooks of young ferns, when the dip of oars was heard from two quarters. On their right appeared Mrs. Phelp's boat, from the left two,—cutting the water under the impetus of stout, manly arms. Gerald's feeble pipe of salutation was drowned by a deep-throated cheer from Richard and Paul Phelps. A third man followed them to land. Rex shook hands with him, while the family greetings went on.

"Hardly expected to meet you in the woods, Mr. Lupton!" said one, with an effort at cordial ease.

The other—"How do you do, Mr. Lee?"

"My love!" Richard turned his fine, sunny face toward them to say, still holding his wife's hand in his,—"I must have you know a gentleman who has

done much toward making the last week pleasant for us,—Mr. Lee, of Freehold!"

It was a handsome boy—he looked like one, although three-and-twenty—who bared his short, brown curls, and bowed in acknowledgment of the introduction. He had laughing hazel eyes, a ready smile that showed brilliant teeth under a slight moustache, and much grace of address and carriage.

"A nice fellow!" Paul said aside to his sister. "You'll like him!"

Not until Mr. Phelps had presented his new friend to both ladies, did he seem to see the tall figure standing on the outskirts of the group. The atmosphere of *aloofness* that went everywhere with Rex Lupton was significant, rather than characteristic. He has been on the circumference of everything for so long that he fitted in nowhere,—a peculiarity of which he was more painfully conscious than anybody else. Even Richard's suavity suffered a change as his eye rested upon him.

"Ah, Mr. Lupton!" extending a civil hand. "I hope I have the pleasure of seeing you quite well? It has been a long time since we met. Mrs. Phelps's letters, which I found awaiting me at Bartlett's last night, informed me that you were at Martin's, in quest of health for your brother—" smiling and shaking hands less formally with Gerald. "He looks thin, but not at all ill. Our little *coup d'état* of the meeting was entirely successful"—addressing his wife. "We could not have timed our arrivals better. If we would enjoy one of Mrs. Bartlett's best dinners before it is spoiled, we must re-embark forthwith."

His courtesy to the son of his old neighbor was perfect, and as lifeless as the action of an automaton. As coolly and easily he directed the seating in the boats of the enlarged party. It was altogether natural that he should take his wife with him and instruct Paul to assume the charge of his sister.

"That leaves us three fellows out in the cold!" observed Lee, *sotto voce*, to Rex. There was the same evident attempt at friendliness as before, and the like failure. "May I ask your brother to share my canoe?" he went on, daunted, but persevering.

"Assuredly—if you wish it. Gerald, will you accept Mr. Lee's offer?"

The boy could not have rejected it, with decent grace, but in the loneliness that had befallen Rex in the last five minutes, he wished Gerald would elect to go with him, and was unreasonably chagrined at his eager assent to the proposal of so slight an acquaintance as the elder knew Hollis Lee to be. The air was raw, the sunshine wan, as he bestowed himself in the bows of the boat, after watching the guide's disposition of the luggage in the stern to trim the craft, now that the chair-backed seat was empty.

A thought struck him, as the oars touched the water.

"You are the best oarsman in the party, and our load is the lightest, Moody," he said, in the hard, quiet accents his mill-hands knew best. "Push on as fast as you can. I shall get a lunch at Bartlett's, and go straight on to the upper lake for an afternoon's fishing."

He pulled his hat down upon his brows and braced

his heels against a boat-rib; the slender craft bounded on in the lessening wake of the others.

"Hooray!" shouted Gerald, as it passed him; Lee swung his hat and laughed; Salome waved her hand, and Paul raised his hat in reply to the grave bow from the head uncovered to the ladies.

Mrs. Phelps looked after the swiftly-receding boat with intentness that made her husband say:

"Characteristic—that! There is a lack of sociability which is discourtesy."

The wife seemed not to have heard him.

"Who is Mr. Lee?" she asked. "He has a pleasing face."

"A brother of Rev. Rufus Lee, who removed to Freehold after we went abroad. This boy, Hollis, is a lawyer, and hopes in time to get clients, he says. He is one of the finest fellows I have met for many a day. I hope we shall see a great deal of him when we are settled at home."

Mr. Lupton was not at the landing to receive his friends upon their arrival at Bartlett's. Gerald accounted for him at the dinner-table:

"He halted just long enough to have a sandwich put up for him, then pushed across the carry to the 'Upper.' I guess he'll turn up at supper-time. The trout won't bite after sunset. He loves fishing better than anything else in the world."

They kept early hours at Bartlett's when the nights were too cool for sitting on the porch. Salome had gone to her room when she heard steps in the passage and voices in the room opposite hers—Gerald's unceremonious "Hello!" and Rex's lower and slower tones

in reply. The girl smiled at her image, reflected in the small dingy mirror. She was glad her friend had come back; but she had been very happy with Paul all the afternoon and evening. Hollis Lee and Gerald had spent their daylight hours on the lake and rambling ashore, and she had had her twin-brother quite to herself. Paul would enter the Junior class at Yale in the autumn. They must make the most of the next few months together. He liked his new comrade, Hollis Lee—also a Yale man—"immensely," and she was prepared to do the same on his recommendation. Paul had asked "if Lupton, Jr., were as *blasé* and glacial as of old?" She defended her friend warmly, yet she wondered silently, while brushing and binding up her hair, her face growing soberer with thinking, if there were not something unfortunate in the manner so many people disliked. Her father spoke of him to Paul in her hearing as "a starched and stupid puppy," and she saw Hollis Lee turn away to hide a sudden laugh at the epithet.

Yet "Mamma" surely liked him, still! She said it to herself after her head was on the pillow, her brain steadying with the assertion. She loved and honored her father, but she had not lived with him for twenty years with both young eyes wide open, and not learned that, like other men, he was seldom extravagant in admiration of his own sex. Also, that when this occurred, it was almost certain to be the corollary to the favored individual's appreciation of Richard Phelps's admirable qualities. It was a weakness common to humankind, she reasoned loyally, to reciprocate good-will by good-will. She was vexed, when

she would have gone to sleep, to find her brain actively speculating as to what offence Rex had offered her parent's self-love, and what incense Hollis Lee had offered at the same shrine.

The thought crossed her mind again, as her promenade on the piazza with her father before breakfast next morning was interrupted by meeting the brothers. Gerald was arrayed in a fresh white tennis-shirt, stitched with blue; his eyes danced gayly in his sunburnt face, his hair was wet, his complexion healthy from a swim in the lake. Rex, clean-shaven except for moustache and squared whiskers, wore what to the Adirondack vernacular is known as "a b'iled shirt," a stiff collar and speckless gray coat and trousers. He might have been setting forth for a New England meeting-house where he expected to "take up the collection." As on yesterday, Richard's manner varied in addressing the two, and in resuming the walk he kept Gerald close to him by rapid questions and flattering interest in the lad's replies. Salome slipped her hand from his arm and fell behind to Rex's side, the porch being too narrow for three to walk abreast, when one of them wore flowing skirts.

"I hope you were successful in your fishing excursion?" she said, cheerfully.

She could not have uttered a more trite thing, but the sympathetic voice and clear, ingenuous eyes conveyed all that he would have had her say. They were friends, between whom the meetings and partings of yesterday had left no shadow. There is always a jar, sometimes an unsettling, in the fusion of two or

more travelling-parties that, up to the hour of the junction, have been perfectly harmonious. The uncoupling and rejoining are not more happily effected when members of the same family have belonged to the different sections. The readjustment of relations is awkward to some one or more of the company, occasionally to all. It gave Rex a disagreeable sensation to see Salome's hand on her father's arm, and resting there more familiarly than it had on his in the long walks they were wont to take together on the piazza of the Saranac Lake House. One whose rights preceded and dominated his had possession of the companion who had interested and drawn him out of his monotonous reserve. He was conscious of a loss and a new-born longing he had not analyzed when Salome joined him. Heart and face warmed, as he offered his arm with a glance she did not see, and Hollis Lee,—coming up from the lake, alert and handsome as a young god—did. He saluted the little party brightly, and, with the tact of a true gentleman, caught the step with Mr. Phelps and Gerald, with never a backward look at the others. They were all pacing back and forth when the bell rang for breakfast. Mrs. Phelps appeared in the doorway before it ceased to tinkle, with a morning greeting to the young men. Paul followed her, chatting merrily with Mrs. Bartlett.

"No! no!" the worthy landlady persisted, shaking a reproving finger. I cannot fib on the Sabbath day, even for you, Master Paul! You are a good fisherman, and your father is a better, but we have to thank Mr. Lupton for the finest catch of the season, thus

far. We always expect something extraordinary from him. He was born lucky, I think."

"With a patent, self-revolving, silver-plated spoon in his mouth?" The speaker was Mr. Phelps; his tone was suave. "I hope we are to have the benefit of your example and instructions for some time, Mr. Lupton? I, for one, shall be happy to go to school to you."

"I beg that you will not think—" murmured Rex, uncertain whether sarcasm or courtesy were intended, yet with the uneasy sensation of having been pricked somewhere.

Mrs. Phelps interposed without the appearance of interruption:

"We will have no discussion of worldly sports to-day, but go directly in to breakfast upon fish prepared as nobody but Mrs. Bartlett can cook them. Do you know, Richard—" linking her hand in his arm—"she has promised to teach me how to bake trout in cream, exactly as it is done here?"

Her husband laughed down at her,—the gleam of prideful amusement no one else had from him:

"Culinary details are Sunday-er talk than fishing—the Apostolic profession—are they?"

"Undoubtedly! As pertaining to works of necessity and mercy! Salome! Paul! Gerald! All of you young people! I serve notice on you here and now, that Mrs. Bartlett expects to see you at the five o'clock service this afternoon in the parlor. There are two clergymen in the house."

Her ear, more sensitive than Richard's, heard Rex say, low, to Salome:

"Then will you give me my walk this forenoon?"

"If mamma has no objection," said the girl blithely.

And mamma, contriving to be found reading in her room, half an hour after the abundant breakfast was despatched, was invited to make a third in a forest stroll. The foreign and un-Freehold fashion of chaperonage had become so natural to mother and daughter that the invitation to the latter included both. Rex's ideas on this head were the butt of many sly and direct bolts in his native town. People said he was afraid to trust himself alone with a spinster lest she might propose, and he be without witness to his rejection of the offer; that the manes of his departed love demanded this safeguard, and much more refined pleasantry to the same purpose, most of which, in time, sifted through the network of gossipry to him.

Mrs. Phelps consented readily.

"Papa, Paul and Mr. Lee are going by boat to the Prospect House to lunch, and would like to offer the vacant seat in the second boat to Gerald," she observed. "We—you and I—do not much affect Sunday excursions, you know, so they took it for granted we would stay behind. Papa would not leave us, but there is a friend at the Prospect House whom he is anxious to see, and who goes to-morrow morning. Six years of continental life make one careless in these respects. I wish it were not so. Although—" with a laugh—"my forefathers would have thought it sinful to spend Sunday morning in the woods, as we propose to do, even with such companions as the

Bible, Thomas-à-Kempis and Keble. Unless Rex objects, we will walk across the carry with the others and see them take boat. Papa will be pleased, I am sure."

"I wonder"—mused Salome aloud, as she gathered up shawls, gloves and books,—"if, at your age, I shall be as thoughtful of other people's convenience and pleasure as you are! It is always 'what would papa like?' or 'will this please the children?' How does it feel to live entirely out of one's self? to be conscious of none but a vicarious existence?"

"Ask somebody else, my love,—a post-graduate in the school of self-abnegation. I am only in the primary department, with a formidable array of daily demerit marks."

She walked over the carry between husband and son, sometimes with a hand on the arm of each; her face as cloudless as the sky, her voice mellowed, not sharpened, by time, carried by the breeze to the ears of the younger and fleeter walkers in front. Several times they heard her laugh, and hearty outbursts of mirth marked her auditors' relish of her sallies.

"Jolly! ain't she?" Gerald cocked up his eye at Hollis Lee to say. "As good company as a fellow—better than all the girlites in the country, although Salome is cut out on the same pattern. But Mrs. Phelps is A No. 1,—and always the same, just as you see her now."

The other nodded assent.

"I was never more agreeably surprised in a woman. In Freehold, the impression is that she is less genial in disposition than her husband. He is decidedly the more popular of the two there."

"Bah! that's Freehold, all over! Because he and his ancestors were born in their precious little township, and she and hers were not! He's all right, of course,—as his invitation to me to-day proves,—but she *can't—be—beat!*"

He dashed along the road to run, squirrel-like, along a log laid outside of the saw-mill they were passing, poising himself on the extremest end which projected far over the water.

"Look out there, my boy!" shouted Richard warningly.

Rex's call was strident, almost shrill:

"Gerald! come back this instant! What are you about?"

They had all stopped. The saw-mill, picturesque in Sabbath stillness; the lake, dark at the verge with shadows of inverted trees standing on their tops in fathomless deeps, and beyond the reflections, as placid-blue as the heavens it mirrored; the scent of the fresh sawdust; the piles of timber, hewn and rough; in the vista ending in a broader sweep of blue water, the boats drawn up on the shore, and the guides, one of whom wore a red shirt, motionless beside them, all this Salome was to recall in days to come, with the qualm of odd heart-sickness caused by the sneer with which her father looked from one of the Luptons to the other, the impatient twitch he gave his moustache in checking the impulse to interfere between them.

For Gerald, intuitively appreciating that some of the company were in sympathy with him, coolly faced his guardian, stood on one foot and balanced himself

in ballet-dancer attitude, waving his arms dramatically :

"Liberty or death ! If you want me, come for me, tyrant ! "

Beaten and mortified, Rex's fine breeding did not desert him.

"Shall we walk on ! " he said, briefly, to Salome, and without another word or look for the recusant lad, they took the lead to the landing.

The trifling episode excited the girl unaccountably. Her cheeks burned, her breath came short, and when Rex stepped aside to pluck a flower for her, the fingers that rceived it were nervously uncertain. He was tranquil in seeming ; his voice, in the few commonplaces exchanged with her, firm and pleasant as usual. But he did not notice Gerald, who overtook the party before they reached the boats, audaciously indifferent to approbation or censure.

"It is very kind in you to take him with you," the elder brother said in his chilliest, grand-seigneur manner to Mr. Phelps. Had Gerald been four instead of fourteen years old, he would have been spoken of in the same way. "I hope he will give you no trouble."

Richard espoused the lad's cause on the spot.

"If he finds no ground of complaint against *us*, I shall be satisfied. We invite him for our own sakes—not for his. Come, my man ! We must be off ! "

Eye and emphasis pointed the dissimilarity between his estimate of his *protégé's* age and consequence, and that in which the imperious mentor held him. Gerald responded by leaping into the stern, swelling with

self-conceit, and as aggressively impudent as air and looks, without words, could make him.

Richard kissed wife and daughter, hat in hand, Paul following suit. The tall youth had learned chivalry of bearing from his father, whose demeanor to the women of his family was inimitable. Hollis Lee noted and admired it; Rex—standing apart, as usual—was ready, in his chagrin at the Admirable Crichton's treatment of himself, to believe the whole performance a hollow sham. He and Richard had never been in sympathy with one another; they were fast becoming antipathetic.

Mrs. Phelps, Salome, and Rex watched the boats in silence until they passed behind the nearest bend, and, still mutely, turned back.

"If you will let me pilot you—" Rex broke the spell with an effort—"I can take you to a point that commands a fine view, with comparatively little fatigue."

The day was cool and clear. Even in the windless woods they climbed comfortably, Rex holding back green branches and breaking dry ones that threatened garments and hair. A slightly-worn path, invisible to the untrained eye, took them to the hill-top, from which they saw Round Lake lying like a vast bowl, on one hand, and the water-chain, beginning with the island-gemmed Upper Saranac, on the other. Everywhere else were the hills, moveless billows of verdure, with, here and there, a bold forehead of rock thrust into sight like the head of an inquisitive behemoth.

Mrs. Phelps preferred a rustic seat fixed in a tree-trunk to further exploration. She had her books and

the prospect, and would need nothing more for hours. Only—they must not wander too far away, or forget the early dinner. Should they find the wonderful ice-cavern Paul and Gerald had happened upon yesterday, she would like to see it. Had Rex heard of, or visited it? Paul reported tons of solid ice packed away by Jack Frost under the shelving rocks. They might come back for her, should they happen upon it. Always providing it could be reached without much scrambling and climbing. She had not much of the cat about her, and confessed to a preference for safe levels. Salome must look for more arbutus, and gather enough for a table-bouquet for good Mrs. Bartlett.

Blessed and convenient beyond the average of the race is the woman whose neat neutrality of phrase is like a compress to a broken bone and poultices to abraded flesh, when nobody else is sufficiently free from pain or malease to know what to say!

The mortifying scenes at saw-mill and landing, the reserve that had made their escort unsocial during the woodland tramp, were like annoying dreams, breaking, scatteringly, with the speed of the spectres that beleaguered Prague, before the frank cordiality of chaperonely speech. Since "Mamma" perceived no occasion for discomfort, did any exist?

Salome ran back when the two young people had gone some scores of paces down the hill, to kiss her mother once more.

"Darlingest, delightfullest, wisest, *divinest* of created beings!" she whispered, between a rain of

caresses, and flew back to where Rex was waiting for her.

The mother remained as motionless as the tree behind her, hands clasped on the unopened books in her lap, eyes fixed on the two boats, dwindling in the distance, Gerald's white shirt and the red of the guide's making bright specks on the deep blue of the still lake. Husband and children fondly vowed that she grew younger every year. In the solitude of the hill-top, her color waned grayly; sharp lines appeared around her mouth and eyes. It was as though a warrior had turned aside, unmissed, from the field, to doff his harness, and staunch the wound he would not have comrade or foe suspect. The holy angels might know and pity this woman's pain, perhaps minister to her in her extremity. No mortal ever heard her moan.

Salome's face was as happy as the sunbright waters, when having filled hands and pocket-handkerchiefs with arbutus—palest pink-and-white from the winter's sleep and late blossoming under pine-needle coverlets—she sat down on the shawl Rex laid over a mossy rock, and set about sorting her treasures.

"I wish it were possible to supply you with them all the year round," Rex said, regretfully. "No other flower suits you so well."

She received the remark as something wholly impersonal.

"I fail to see the analogy between them and a girl who has grown up in a semi-tropical latitude, as the petted daughter of a luxurious home—who has had nothing but summer weather. You know,"—touching

the perfumed pallor of the heap lightly, lest she might bruise it—" they will not be domesticated. A Blandford woman, whom we met abroad, told me that the finest arbutus she ever saw covered a hill near that town. School-children and all sorts of excursion parties flocked out there, year after year, to gather it, and the more they carried off the more it flourished. At last, the owner of the hill, where nothing else pretty grew, and nothing was cultivated, got tired of being 'overrun with people that did him no good,' so he fenced in the great field, and put up boards to warn off trespassers. The next spring after this was done, the ground was all rosy and sweet with arbutus that nobody came to pick ; the year after, there was not one-tenth as much ; in three years it had all died, as of a broken heart. Not a spray or root can be found there now—only a stony common, where even sheep would starve."

Rex had thrown himself at full-length on the ground, resting on his elbow, his head on his hand.

" I have not altered my opinion," he said, smiling quietly. " If you would shake it, you must give me some other reason than the perverse desire of your favorites to make people happy."

Her cheeks dimpled and flushed, but she answered simply and gratefully :

"Thank you for the graceful compliment ! I prize it the more because you don't make a practice of doing such things."

She went on with the work of selecting and arranging the blossoms. A pine tree spread a wide tent of shade about her ; vertical sun-rays glanced and shiv-

ered against the glossy needles; each bough was tipped with upright shoots, greenish-white, delicate and slender. Salome likened them to wax candles, socketed in readiness for the "spring opening." Tufts of tender verdure lighted the blackish-green of the hemlocks; the larches were hung with green bells and purplish "knops," like the tabernacle-veil. Nature prayed dumbly on her altared hills, this perfect Sabbath-day. The LORD was in His holy temple, and all the earth kept silence before Him.

Then and there, the knowledge of a new life awoke in the soul of the lonely man; the heart that had dwelt in the shadow of a grave for six years came out into the air and sunshine of GOD's world of love and beauty, exultant in the surprise of discovering that they were still his; that the chrism of pain does not (praised be the All-merciful!) set forever apart him who receives it from the hope of future joy.

CHAPTER IX.

REV. RUFUS LEE and his wife returned from their summer vacation of one month (the same being duly and sacredly stipulated in his "call") the second week in September. Ten days thereafter, they were bidden to take tea with Mrs. Fitchett, the richest woman in the North Hill Church, and she a widow. She still held her membership there, although she had built a smart mansion on the West Side of Freehold, the corner-stone of which was laid six weeks after her husband relaxed his hold upon the wealth he had scraped together. His "relict" was ambitious of certain things he had despised as unremunerative—notably, show and social position.

The September sun was at its sickliest height that day, and the red brick house had absorbed so much caloric that at six o'clock it seemed to palpitate and radiate like a monstrous live coal. The nearest shade-trees were in the Phelps grounds, which adjoined Mrs. Fitchett's. She had a fine clump of oaks and maples felled to make room for her conservatory, and built a spindle-shanked tower with a flanged wheel at top, over a lovely natural spring bubbling out of a dingle back of the hill on which the house stood, thus securing a supply of living water for family use. She "couldn't abide the thought of reservoir stuff." That her spring sluiced off the

drainage of her establishment and her neighbors', borrowing sparkle from sewer-gas, she could never be made to believe. In the teeth of two cases of typhoid in the first year of her residence in the fashionable quarter, and numberless visitations of malarial disorders to her household, she held to the opinion that the "beaded" element pumped by the windmill through the leaden arteries of her home was the elixir of life by comparison with that drawn by the chartered service of the town from a mountain lake, twenty miles away from sewers and paper, woollen, and chemical "works."

Goblets of the ice-cold elixir were passed in the parlors before supper was served, by the hostess's own fat hands.

"*You* ain't by no means addicted to water, I know, Mrs. Lee," she said pointedly, going in front of her and reaching across to offer the silver tray to the pastor. "I was a-sayin' to somebody th' other day, how peculiar-tastical you was in that respec'. I don' recollec' as I ever saw you take a drop of the limpin' elerment in my house. You look's hot's fire too, this blessed minnit. I'm sure you're thirsty an' won't tell it."

"My good wife has a fad of not drinking between meals," Mr. Lee interposed before his spouse could get an answer together. "She loses much when she does not yield to this temptation!" replacing the emptied half-pint goblet upon the tray.

The act was one of many that made the incumbent of the North Hill Church popular. He believed in the unwholesomeness of filtered drainage as thoroughly

as did his wife, and had an equal horror of numbing the digestive organs by copious imbibitions of cold water. It was a standing joke in his family that he carried quinine capsules in his pocket, and stole the opportunity to swallow one during each call at "the Fitchett Folly," as the flaming structure was slyly named through the country-side. But he was born in the cloth, having been brought up in a rural parsonage. His wife was an importation. She was a pretty little woman, better born and of gentler breeding than her husband, with great wistful eyes, blue as a baby's, delicate features, and much sweetness and intelligence of expression. She wore white this afternoon—an India muslin, trimmed with lace, tolerated by the North Hill "people" because, as was carefully explained by her friends, it was a part of her trousseau.

"You look real girlish in white," remarked Mrs. Greene, another parishioner, who sat on the sofa with her. "Somebody was askin' of me th' other night to the church-sociable, 'if that young lady in white muslin 'n' blush-roses was a bride.'"

Everybody laughed, and Mrs. Lee blushed.

"Youth is a fault time will cure," she returned lightly. "Blondes do not wear so well as darker women who may look older up to thirty, then change little until fifty."

"That's so!" responded Mrs. Fitchett, whose skin was opaque, and her hair coarse and black. "You've gone off quite a good deal since you come to tabernacle 'mong us, 's you may say. Better make th' best o' your milk-'n'-roses while they last. We

brunettes soon get the better o' you fair-complected ones. Your kind o' good looks is only skin-deep—what you might call *reminiscent.*"

Without definite intention of wounding her, or of being uncivil, the North Hill people adopted this tone of frank depreciation of their minister's wife. They had taken stock in him and his, and, having paid for it, bulled and beared it as independent shareholders had a right to do. The church was a bonded corporation in which every pew-owner had interest and vote. The pastor was salaried to run it according to orders,—but always on business principles. In some latitudes, he would have been bishop and shepherd; a leader, beloved for his works' sake, enshrined in the hearts of his flock as brother, friend and teacher,—knitted to their souls by golden links, each of them a memory of the comfort he had brought in their affliction, sympathy in joy, light in darkness, of the sweetest loves of earth and the holiest hopes of heaven. That was "not the Freehold way of doing things." When that was said, an end was put to all controversy.

"I never weary of the prospect from this window," Mr. Lee observed at this juncture, playing buffer to the clicking balls. Incautiously, as presently appeared, he ventured upon a figure of speech (professional). "It elevates the soul, broadens one's mental and spiritual views to dwell on such a scene."

"That's true 's gospel!" ejaculated the hostess, hastening to join his look-out in the bay-window, which, being on the north side of the house, could be opened without damage to the fervid dyes of the velvet carpets. "Why, only yest'day, I diskivered that

you can see that new barn of the Gilseys with the cupilow, much 's four mile off. I was *that* pleased! for I set a deal o' store by Miss Gilsey. She's a first cousin o' my latter husband, an' 't seemed to me she was quite neighboreous when I caught sight of the cardinal-red roof 'n' the gilt weather-cocker o' that barn. He's built him a paladin of a place there, up onto Forest Ledge, but, 'dear me!' says I to her oncet, 'I wouldn't be hired to live out there, two mile from the railroad 'n' no store nor church nearer 'n Freehold!' I'm secluded enough from *my* church, goodness knows! In hot weather, sech 's we had in Joone, befo' I went t' th' sea-shore 'n' Saratogy, 'twarnt an easy thing to be on han' in my pew, Sunday mornin', 'n' last winter I *did* romance inter the West Hill a couple o' times!"

A chorus of exclamations interrupted her.

"Just hear her now!" from Mrs. Greene.

"See you don't do it again!" Mrs. Emmons.

"Now, *dear* Mrs. Fitchett, don't break our hearts!" from Mrs. Tom Johnston, whose husband made his money (in the hide-and-leather business) so long ago that Freehold condoned the interpolated "*t*" on her visiting-cards, although the Sam Johnsons, who lived on the old farm a little way out of town, repudiated the genteel consonant.

A basso undertow swept back the treble surge.

"Th' Old North Hill wouldn't bear *that* f' more'n a couple o' weeks!" protested Deacon Emmons.

Mr. Greene belonged to the Parish Committee, and threatened a formal petition from that hierarchy, should heat or cold ever rob the Mother Church of

one of its pillars (he pronounced it "pillows") even temporarily. As Superintendent of Public Schools, Mr. Greene leaned heavily on polysyllables.

"Somebody hinted 'n my hearin', the other day, that you *hed* some notion o' 'tendin' the toney church since you'd moved over here amongst the quality."

Mr. West, whose wife had not yet formulated her protest, made himself heard in this malapropos observation. His partner tittered a dutiful second to his chuckle. Nobody else was amused. Some looked frightened, others black. Mrs. Fitchett bridled and bristled all over. People that are most astonished that others should take *their* plain-speaking to heart, are readiest to resent innuendoes. The widow, although pachydermatous, purpled vividly.

"'Pon my word, Mr. West, I flatter myself I heven't any call to jine any church for to git good sassiety!" fanning herself violently. "Thet's what I said only week befo' last to Mrs. Richard Phelps, when I was a-callin' on her. I told her we hedn't the name o' being aristocratical 'n' th' Ole North Hill, as they hez 'n the Wes' Side. 'But,' sez I, 'people whose social statue is secure, don' need to trust to church-relations for their *prestyge*. I've presided in Freehold ever since I were born,' sez I, 'an' my descendants before me, an' my parrents substantiative citizens,' sez I, 'as all the town ken testivify. Folks know who they *was*, an' who *I be*, I guess, by this time, or they're 'mazin' dull schollards, Mrs. Phelps,' sez I."

"Do tell! Well! of all the c'rageous ladies as ever I see, to lay down the lor to her, that way!" cried Mrs. Emmons.

"For the Land's sake!"—Mrs. West.

"I want t' know!" sighed Mrs. Johnston, in envious admiration.

Fidelia Fitchett, an overdressed damsel of fifteen, had her word of corroboration:

"I tell *you*, Mother was even with her, every time! She just gave it to her, right 'n' left!"

Here was a juicy tid-bit! The widow, restored to smiles by the sensation excited by her audacious repartee, waved off breathless inquirers with radiant appreciation of the value of her communication.

"Supper is ready!" she announced coquettishly. "You'd ruther eat nor gossip, any time o' day—wouldn' you? Mr. Lee! will you consign me your arm, an' let Mr. West bring your lady? The rest o' you ken pair off 's you like. The hall ain't what might be called an amyrinth, exactly. Let's go 'n' see what the neighbors hez sent in!"

The concluding original formula was a favorite with the rich woman. As understood by herself and her toadies, it conveyed an adroit insinuation of the abundant provision made by her own purse for feeding her friends,—a Rembrandtish cartoon, throwing out one main truth by massing shadows behind it. She, who could never by the most extravagant sketch of imagination be pictured as the recipient of eleemosynary aid, could afford to dally with the figure.

The table was laden with silver, glass, porcelain, and edibles.

"We still cohere to the old Yankee costume o' settin' most everything there is to eat before you at

oncet," she said, in proud humility, as, having put broiled chicken, tongue, and fried potatoes on a plate for Mrs. Lee, who sat at her left as Mr. Lee's *vis-à-vis*, she proceeded to encompass the central trenches with saucerlings of currant jelly, raw tomatoes, lobster-salad, pickled oysters, and succotash. "I ain't hed a meal to Mrs. Phelps' yet, but I'm informed by creditable witnesses that there's nothin' on to her table to eat when the family sits down to it, without its glasses, silver, and china, 'n' the flower-piece in the middle. Everything—even the wines—is handed by her colored man from the *booffette*,—if you please, French fashion!"

"'*Deenay à la Roos*' it's called," said Miss Fidelia. "It's all the style now with the big-bugs an' howlin' swells in N'York an' Bosston.'"

"'Roose' be kicked!" sneered the energetic mother. "*I* call it disgustin' humbug, 'n' enough fur to make Dick Phelps's father squirm in his grave. *That* come o' Dick's marryin' a Baltimore high-flyer, 'stead of a smart, sensible Yankee girl, what would help him keep his money, not perpetrate it out o' winder by the double han'ful."

She had packed and surrounded every plate by now, and the board presented the appearance of a succession of planetary systems—a series of orreries, with an equitable distribution of satellites.

"I hev'n't much 'f 'n' appetite myself," she pursued when the rest—the first having waited in solemn anxiety for the last to be helped—fell to work with military precision upon the bountiful "feed." "By the time I've got up a company-supper, 't seems t' me,

I've hed my share on it. So 'f you like, I'd go on with th' story o' my visit to Lady Phelps."

"Do, do!" cried the women in unison. The men, too busy to articulate, nodded approbation.

Mrs. Fitchett had a reputation as a wit in her set, even with those who were aware that, as Mrs. Greene put it confidentially to her husband, "the dear lady now an' then slipped up on a long word." She said rude things with a dash, and rollicked over platitudes until they stole character from her relishful mounting. She had shed widow's weeds in the third year after her Amasa's demise. Prolonged mourning was deprecated by Freeholders as useless and sentimental. It helped nobody, and was, if not expensive, shabby; if not shabby, expensive. Moreover, it did not show for what it cost. Nobody understood better than the "Widow Fitchett, her as was Almira Day,"—her disposition to marry again, provided a "sootable pardner" offered. She jested freely of "No. 2" in her only child's hearing, and even regretted audibly that he had not "turned up" in time to share the trouble and care of building the big new house on the West Side. Being belated, he must be satisfied with things as he found them.

She was clad, this evening, in a black grenadine elaborately wrought with gilt daisies, much larger than life. Hollis Lee, on seeing it in church, described it as a "joint memorial to Nos. 1 and 2. Black was for the one; the gilt betokened her springing hopes of finding the other." The gown was elaborately trimmed with black lace, dotted with gilt. Her fan matched it; her sleek black hair was

braided greasily at the back of her head and fastened with a gilt comb ; her ornaments were an onyx-and-gold necklace and bracelets of the same. In her ears dangled diamond pendants, and her fingers were studded with stones of various kinds—all large. She "believed in clothes that looked real rich, and no mistake about it."

Alternately fluttering her fan and supping hot tea that made moist the magenta glow induced by much blood and the sultriness of a room a-blaze with gas—she put forth the tale :

"I took F'delia with me, seein' there was young folks in the fam'ly, 'n' I wanted they should understand I felt to want to be sociable. The colored man come to th' door quick 's I ring the bell. Most too ambitious he was, for I'd 'a' liked to hev spied about a little. The piazzer was cluttered up with chairs 'n' work-baskets, 'n' little tables with books 'n' flower-vases onto 'em, quite regardless, for all the world like a garden-scene at the theayter. Jes' 's 't use' to be when *she* had charge o' the ole house before, 's I've heard. We was a-livin' down-town then, 'n' F'delia she was little, 'n' the twins I lost was babies, 'n' it stan's to reason 's I hedn't time to waste caparisonin' about town to call on strangers. But, seein' they'd jes' moved in nex' door, it was my dooty for t' make the firs' visit with 'em, let what might come o' the 'quaintance afterwards. Yes! Mrs. Phelps was to home, the young man said, solemn 's a judge, yet kinder chipper-like too, but Miss Phelps, she hed gone to ride. So, he took our cards on to a silver waiter, 'n' bowed us inter the parlor, an' went off to

look *her* up. Sech comical parlors I never see in all *my* life, 'n' I've been about inter nice houses 's much 's the next one. Floor, all bare boards, 's slippery 's glass, with rugs, big 'n' little, dispersin' all over it; sofas an' chairs o' all kinds,—no two alike, standin' 'round in no sort of order; some cushioned with silk, some velvet, some bamboo. 'Twas enough for to give a furnitoore-dealer a spazzum to look at 'em. An' easels stuck in corners, an' out in the room, piled with pictures, some of 'em with Injy scarfs looped across the corners of the frames. Scraps 'n' breadths o' soft silky stuffs ketched up on corners everywhere, an' streakin' 'cross things gen'rally. A marble woman in one corner, with a curtain behind her, an' no clothes to speak of, on her, an' her finger on her mouth, 's if to warn you not t' inquire the name o' the pawnbroker what hed the balance o' her twilight—"

A laugh, loud and long, broke the continuity of the story.

"You ought to enter the editorial profession, Mrs. Fitchett," said Mr. Greene, heavily gallant. "Your talents are wasted in private life. Mrs. Lea, may I assist you to butter? Go on, my dear madam! go on!"

"Where was I?" still shaking from the effects of her own wit. "Oh! the statute in the corner! Then there was bronze figgers 'n jars painted like the Irids —an' th' Land knows what besides. I hedn't seen half befo' my lady swims in, like a sizable ghost, all in white, like our marble friend, but *more of 'em*, you understand! White cashmere, or nun's veiling, or somethin' woolly, and not a mite o' stiffenin' into it.

Not a speck o' jewelry on, without 'twas her weddin' 'n' engagement rings. Instead of a breas'pin, a bow of white Chiny silk 'n' lace, with a sprig o' mignonette caught, kind o' careless, in it. 'How do you do, Mrs. Fitchett?' sez she"—an unsuccessful attempt at mimicry of voice and accent. "You know the low-an'-smooth tongues of Southern and traveled women. 'You are very kind to call s' soon,' sez she, when we'd shook han's, an' I'd interdoosed F'delia. 'S much 's to say, I'd put myself forrard—don't you see?"

"Oh!" interjected Mrs. Lee, involuntarily. "I *don't* think she meant *that!* I have no doubt she was really gratified by your early call."

Her husband gave her a swift, monitory glance. The chorus of matrons broke out in full accord:

"Not she!"

"Don't you believe it!"

"That ain't her kind!"

"Not that she wasn't awful civil!" Mrs. Fitchett added, hardly deigning to notice the inopportune plea. "But 'twas plain 's th' nose on your face that 'twasn't no more 'n skin-deep. She made conversation, straight along, all th' while I was there, pickin' out subjec's she thought 'd int'rest me, 'n' askin' F'delia 'bout her school 'n' all that, in the worldly way some people hez, behavin' jist th' same t' everybody, you know, 'n' no sincerity in none of it. She hez th' gift o' th' gab t' perfection. I've heard it said that she always eludes to her husban' 's '*Mr.* Phelps' to everybody, 'n' I went considerable out o' my way to name him 's 'Richard,' 'n' then t' 'pologize f' the liberty, sayin' 's how I'd went to school with him when we was chil-

dren together, 'n' t' slipped out before I was awares. An' sez she, 'He enjoys the return to his old home and friends more than I ca[illegible]il you. I am glad you remember him as a boy.' That gave me a chance I'd been a-watchin' for' t' speak of his health 'n' the circumstances o' his exileodus from his parential residence, 'n' how it must 'a' been quite a harrow to *her*, t'come back, considerin' th' fatalistic accidence t' her frien',—'n' her a beautiful young lady that was like a' nadopted sister to her,—I'd understood.

"'We are all well content to settle down at last in a home of our own,' sez she, low 'n' smooth 's cashmere bouquet soap-lather. 'We have been tossed about in the world for so long that we fully appreciate rest, plenty of room—and Freehold. Is it because I have not seen it for so long that it seems unusually beautiful for this season? Is not September generally dry and hot?'

"Do what I would, there was no tollin' her back t' the accidence. I've allers been *that* curious to git hold o' the peticklers that I had counted on drawin' them out o' her, she bein' one o' the principles in it, 's you may say. By-'n'-bye, I s'posed they'd take the ole Phelps pew in the West Side Church, seein' 's how Richard's gran'father hed a-founded it, 's one might say, but that I wished they could see ther way to takin' a seat with us. I reprersented how our minister was an eloquenter speaker 'n' ole Dr. Denison,"—pausing to bob her head grimacingly at the pastor.

"Thank you, Mrs. Fitchett. You are very good, I am sure!" murmured the unlucky official, trying to look flattered.

"Oh, yes! We all speak up for you behind your back, no matter what our genuwine opinions may be—" jocularly. "My lady didn't seem t' care for conversation on spiritooal subjecks. That's the nat'ral effect o' foreign life, I s'pose. Said she had not met Mr. Lee, but hoped to hev the pleasure, 'n' so forth 'n' so forth, more polite lies, you know, run off her tongue, like reelin' yarn by machinery. Then 'twas that I worked in that about aristocratical sassiety. It riled me to see her slip out o' corners I'd put her in, and twist the talk out o' my fingers when I'd got it where I wanted it should be, and me not able to hinder her."

"What *did* she say?" came from three listeners at once.

Mrs. Fitchett struck the call-bell for the maid to change the plates, directing the process assiduously and audibly, and too intent upon it to pursue her narrative until peaches, ice-cream, and four varieties of cake were served and dispensed by her brisk hands, with the impartial celerity that had marked the former distribution.

The room was stiflingly warm; the hot, unctuous vapors of the "hearty supper" seemed, to Mrs. Lee's apprehension, to condense viscidly upon perspiring faces. Fly-nets in every window and door banished all hope of relief from the cooler night without. The tawdry house, the glaring vulgarity of the mistress, the sycophantic guests, were parts of the odious whole of her present mode of existence. But that she must listen to this spiteful fanfaronade of low gossip, and, by her silence, lend countenance to what every right and ladylike instinct condemned, was hardest of all.

The coarse, unmodulated voices racked her senses. The men's were loud and hard, the younger women's clatter was like that of sparrows in nesting-time ; that of the older resembled the clash and chatter of shaken pebbles. Sick, soul and body, she trifled with the fast-melting ice on her costly saucer, and tried not to hear.

Her husband dared not look at her, and, sure though she was of his sympathy, she did not ignore the truth that hers was the heavier burden of the two. For one thing, he had grown up in the harness ; for another, everybody liked him after a fashion, and the pride of the parish in his talents and fine personal presence alleviated his trials. Pride and liking were judiciously disguised lest he might become pampered and presumptuous above what was written as becoming in one who was the servant of his brethren, but he was not ignorant how they felt under the crust of discretion. Then, too, he had his work—a mission which he loved with his whole heart, the Lord's work, however perverted in exercise by man's devices. So far as his helpmeet could discern, he would have been more popular and useful without her, more free to act where he was, freer to stay or to go as Providence might indicate, if not hampered by a family. She was getting to be heretical on the point of the married clergy, and to have grave doubts on others she had been too ready to accept as postulates. For example, was she suffering the Lord's will or the devil's guile in submitting to the insolent patronage of purse-proud vulgarians whose orbits she would never have crossed had she married a member of any other profession

or craft? She endured hourly humiliation, lost social caste, hungered and thirsted intellectually, risked the lowering of moral and mental tone by the enforced reception of the patronage of those who were her inferiors in all save worldly wealth. What divine end was subserved by eating this woman's supper, and submitting to her impertinent humors, dancing attendance upon her whims, in short, joining the ignoble band of her boot-licks, and getting many a kick while thus prostrate—because the patron hired an expensive pew, and contributed liberally to the church's support? And the subservience of pastor and partner must be the more abject for the menace of her secession at any moment were she to imagine herself offended or neglected.

The poor little pastoress suffered degradation in her own eyes while asking and answering these queries. If *this* were doing GOD service—

"Mrs. Lee! you ain't hardly touched your cake!" rasped the high, harsh voice at her ear. "I'm sorry if tain't to your taste. I've quite a name for cake-makin' in New England, but I presume likely the New York cooks *is* better."

"Thank you, Mrs. Fitchett! The cake is delicious, but I have a slight headache, and I am afraid that sweets are not good for it."

"You *be* dretful subjeck to headaches, ain't you? 'T seems to me that it's a pity minister's wives should be so delicate. I don't b'lieve there's a well one in town."

"Her general health is excellent," Mr. Lee was goaded to assert. "These headaches are constitu-

tional and hereditary. Her mother had them until she was nearly fifty, then outlived them entirely, so we live in hope. You have excelled yourself in this banana-cake, Mrs. Fitchett. May I be so rude as to help myself to a second slice?"

This was heroic, as his wife knew. He disliked the odor and taste of bananas, but Mrs. Fitchett had invented the "filling" between the layers of this pile of cake,—a mush of bruised banana and *méringue* that was not improved in flavor by the hot weather. She had lauded her achievement, and pressed the delicacy —literally, *ad nauseam*—upon her guests. In the throb of grateful appreciation of her husband's politic stroke, that swelled the little woman's heart almost to tears, she revoked one clause of her heretical protest. She might be in favor of a celibate clergy as a class, but she was devoutly glad that one theologue had fallen in love with and married *her*.

"Now ain't we never to hev the rest o' that story?" Mrs. Greene bethought herself to say, when they had adjourned from the table to the comparatively tolerable atmosphere of the parlors. "It will be real nice an' appropriate, 'most like a nillustrated lectur, to hear Mrs. Fitchett tellin' about 'em, in her witty way, an' we in full sight o' the Phelpses' house 'n' groun's. There's somethin' goin' on over there this evenin', ain't there? I see a lot o' folks, all dressed up, on the piazza."

"Oh, nothin' more'n common, I guess," said Mrs. Fitchett carelessly, contriving to convey the impression that *she* would have been invited were there bidden guests. "Most likely the Luptons, 'n' maybe

Mr. Hollis Lee. I presume that's why he couldn't accept my invite this evenin'—" wheeling so suddenly upon the pastor that he changed color. "They say he's always hangin' about the Phelpses. After the girl, I guess. If she's such a highflier 's her mother, she won't look at *him*."

"My brother met Mr. Phelps and family in the Adirondacks, last spring, and they became very good friends, I believe," the clergyman had the dignity to reply. "I did not inquire what his engagement was for to-night. I know he is quite busy just now."

An equivocation this, since Hollis had volunteered the information that he had promised to dine with Mr. Phelps. The wife condoned the evasion. When hard-pressed between policy and conscience, what can even the righteous do?

"Often 's not they hev' tea 'n' coffee paraded on the piazzer after their heathenish late dinner," continued the hostess. "That privet-hedge on the right pretty nigh hides the hull place, but from my bedroom winder, I ken see a roun' table set out on the piazzer, any fine evenin', with the cups 'n' saucers, 'n' them a-lollin' 'roun', drinkin' somethin'. *She* decocts the tea 'n' coffee out there over a spirit-lamp, 'n' there's allers somebody besides the fam'ly to help dispose of it. I hed a woman t' clean for me last week, that hed helped settle 'em, 'n' she told me some o' their queer doin's. They hed some New York folks to dine with 'em one day 'n' hed eighteen courses, this Mrs. Graley bein' engaged to wash dishes 'n' so forth. There was six sorts o' wine, she sez, 'n' the last

course of all was *grass!* Some fancy kind, as Mrs. Graley never see before."

"I want t' know!" uttered Mrs. Tom Johnston, tiptoeing to peep over the envious hedge. "I can make out three or four white dresses, and one or two gentlemen."

"Mrs. Lupton wears white at home, now,—with black ribbons, of course—poor thing! *I* know how to feel for her. The year—or two years, if she takes a fancy to distend mournin' so far—when a widder don't go inter sassiety, is the dolefullest time of her mortial career. Mrs. Lupton hez behaved real dutiful to her husban's mem'ry, 'n' she a youngish woman still, 'n' him so much older! Tain't to be expected that she'd take the hull course o' mournin' in reg'lar order, but I admire to see her do it, all the same. An' her adoration t' them children is just sweet-pretty. I only hope 'n' pray ther ain't more trouble in store for her. I didn't mention that we met young Rex goin' inter the Phelpses jest 's we come out, did I?"

"*No?*"

"You don't say!"

"I want to know!"

"Ah—*ha-a-a!*"

This last interjection, long-drawn into significance between Mrs. West's leathery lips.

"I declare to goodness you could 'a' overset me with a feather when me 'n' F'delia a'most colluded with him on the piazzer-steps!" expatiated the hostess. "'Good afternoon, Mr. Lupton!' sez My Lady, brave 's brass, but I see her eyelids quiver. 'N'

he, not a word 's usual,—only lifted his hat in his stiff way and drawed himself up to one side to let us go by! Me, that hez known him sence he was christianed, 'n' his father 'n' my sainted Amasa hevin' thousan's o' dollars o' dealin's together when both of 'em was alive!

"So—'How-dye-do, *Rex?*' sez I, very emphatical, meanin' as both on 'em sh'd understan' that Almira Fitchett's risible organs see through the hypocrisy o' that meachin' 'Mr. Lupton!' I ain't sot eyes on you in a dog's age,' sez I. 'But I 'spose new frien's hez the advantages over ole ones!'"

"You hed him there," rumbled Mr. Tom Johnston, with as much energy as supper had left him. "To see that boy walk the streets of his natyve town, you'd think he didn't care to know a human in it. Very different—very dissimilar, indeed, from his lamented father!"

"He was fair flabbergasted 's you might say, by my little slap in th' face," resumed Mrs. Fitchett, with the complacency of a small mind in a malicious action. "He raised his hat again, 'n' mumbled somethin' 'bout 'claims o' business that left little time for social pleasures.'

"An' up speaks My Lady Phelps in her level-'n'-smooth-'s-butter voice: 'I farncy none o' Mr. Lupton's frien's see 's much o' him as they could wish,' sez she. "His incessant application to business gives them all cause of complaint,' sez she. 'Farncy!' that's the way she said it—too affected 'n' English for anything! So, off we come 'n' in he walked! Or, ruther, they sot down on the piazzer,

together, as plastic 'n' snug 's could be, as reclused behind them thick vines 's they would 'a' been in the house with the doors shut. Nigh 'pon 'n hour later, I see Richard Phelps pass on horseback with his son 'n' daughter, on their way home. An' them two hed hed all that time to themselves! 'Twont take much more o' that sort o' carryin' on to start the ole stories a-goin' again'!"

Mrs. Lee's eyes were round with horrified bewilderment. "But I have thought—I have understood—wasn't he betrothed to her friend who died? Mrs. Phelps must be so much older than Mr. Lupton—I don't in the least comprehend!" she stammered.

The coterie stared at her; some patronizingly, some contemptuously. The men grinned and winked at each other; the women cleared their throats and sniffed.

"She ain't up to all the ins and outs o' human depravity, is she?" said Mrs. Tom Johnston to the black-and-gilt widow.

"She's a new-comer, you know," said her friend, compassionate of the disqualification to enter into the hidden things of Freehold scandal. "'Taint my way for to open folks' eyes to what ain't overly-healthy 'n' prudent to be talked about. But 'twont do for you to be too innercent, Mrs. Lee. You'll be puttin' your foot into it th' first thing you know, an' gettin' your husban' into trouble, like's not. A minister's wife hed ought to be posted on dangerous topics. That Miss Bayard was engaged to this Rex Lupton, 'n' he only a boy, you may say, of three 'n' twenty, 'n' she a ravin' beauty the Phelpses had taken to live with

them,—an heiress from the South. She rid like a circus-woman, 'n' hed all sorts o' accomplishments, 'n' gay 's a lark. Smart 's a steel-trap, too, with eyes like stars that looked right through you, an' a haughty way with her that made nothin' o' nobody. What she took up with that slinky boy for, nobody couldn't make out, 'n' as for him, anybody could see he thought 's much, 'f not more, o' Mrs. Phelps, 's he done o' the girl she meant to make him marry."

"*She* made the match! no doubt about it!" chimed in Mrs. Greene, who was a factory-girl at the time of Marion Bayard's death, and had only seen her on the street, as she herself passed back and forth to her work.

"Of course!" impatiently. "She wanted that the girl should be pervided with a husban', and to keep him danglin' 'roun' *her* at any price. For, there was Richard Phelps—'s indulgent a husban' 's ever drawed th' breath o' resistence, 'n' just wrapped up in his wife, but he's no fool,—Dick Phelps ain't,—'n' them two smart ones couldn't pull the wool over his eyes forever, nor fool Marion Bayard, neither. I presume likely there was danger o' his guessin' how matters was a-going, when My Lady packed her dear friend off to Albany for a visit, 'n' sent Richard along to take care of her. I wouldn't want to hev *her* conscience when she lays awake o' nights, 'n' minds how the trip ended!"

"*I* mind—" Mrs. Greene contributed another block to the dirty mosaic—"meetin' them two ridin' up street together, in high feather when the other two was fairly off, that day. So happy, 'n' lovin', 'n' full

o' talk, they hed no eyes nor ears for anybody else. Everybody was starin' at 'em as the carriage went by. We hed a chromio 't home o' Antony 'n' Cleopaytra, an' I tole mother that night 't reminded me o' *them*, 's I see 'em that noon. The nex' thing I heard, the judgment o' heaven hed fell, 'n' their riotin' was turned into mournin'."

This was felt to be an effective figure, but Mrs. Fitchett was not to be distanced by a woman whose husband was but "middling-well-off" in the stove-business.

"If the bolt ascended from heaven, 'twasn't aimed very good, seein' 's the innercent suffered, 'n' the guilty went scotch-free. If th' truth was tole, it might come out that Rex Lupton ain't been grievin' 'n' sulkin' all these years, like a monk in a nunnery with a shaved head, because Marion Bayard was killed, so much 's because Dick Phelps got well.

'But, there! I ain't one to osculate ugly stories! 'Live 'n' let live!' sez I, 'n' every man mind his own business, 'n' the Almighty for us all! In spite o' all his money 'n' his travels, 'n' his good ole family, 'n' his fine house, Richard Phelps 's 's fine a fellow 's was ever hitched to the wrong woman. There ain't a person, high nor low, but speaks favorable of *him*. He's been over here, three or four times; jest walked 'cross lots, sociable 's could be, seein' me 'bout the groun's, or on the porch. Nothin'-wouldn't do but I must perambulate him over the house 'n' conservatory, 'n' grapery, 'n' show him all my contrivances. Laugh! it jest dooz me good all through to hear that man laugh at a funny story, 'n' nothin' too small for

him to be int'*rested* in. Both the children takes after the mother in their ways. The boy, he favors his father some, but the girl, she's the livin' image o' th' mother. Hez the same trick o' carryin' her head high, an' steppin' out quick 'n' light.

"I *do* hope, Mr. Lee, for your sake 'n' the sake o' the church 'n' the Sassity, that your brother ain't keepin' company with her. That's all the talk now."

"It is not safe to believe all we are told, my dear madam," the minister, being a clergyman, made haste to say. "But, Miss Fidelia, are we to have no music this evening? I hear that you have improved marvellously during your vacation."

While the young lady, reputed in her circle to be a musical prodigy, "executed a piece," Mrs. Lee, withdrawn into the most obscure corner she could get, gazed across the now moonlighted lawn to the peaceful old house with the pillared front. She was fond of her brother-in-law, and he had made her longingly anxious to meet Mrs. Phelps. She had not ventured to call before her husband and herself had "done" the parish round of visitation, but in the cramped, lowered sphere to which she was bound, the thought of association on familiar terms with one so gracious and noble as Hollis had pictured his new friend to be was indescribably tempting. Now—she began to question if it would ever be safe to open intercourse between the parsonage and the Phelps place. Whether or not the revolting stories retailed with horrible gusto by the cabal of gossips had a substratum of fact, Mrs. Phelps was banned by the powers that were in "Church and Society," and might not visit or be visited by her

without peril to Rufus's "usefulness"—phrase of dread import to the conscientious sharer of his life-burden.

She was so colorless with physical and mental nausea when the early hour of separation arrived, that Mrs. Fitchett commented upon it with habitual delicacy:

"'T seems t' me, your vacation ain't benefited you no great deal! I was 'n hopes you'd come home chirked up 'n' ready for th' winter champaign. If th' head's weak, the hull heart 's sick, the Good Book sez. 'N' if a minister's wife ain't right-down capable, 'n' aint got a sight o' faculty, it's kind o' uphillish work for th' rest of us to be wearin' of our energies out in church 'n' parish."

"Oh, she'll come 'roun' all right when cool weather comes," twittered Mrs. Emmons, pitying the object of the attack, as she saw the hot scarlet burn into the white cheeks. "These unseasonable heats *is* tryin'."

"You lean folks hadn't ought to mind em!" retorted the buxom relic of the richest man in the denomination or that section of it resident in Freehold. "Look at *me!* I'd stan' up to my dooty in the world if the thermometer was a thousand in the shade, *Farragut!*"

She called the Lees back when they were half-way to the gate. The rest walked on without them, another illustration of the independent ways of native Freeholders.

The widow bustled into the dining-room, gathered all the withering flowers from the vases, bound them into a hard, huge clump with a hemp string, and thrust them into the hands of the pastor's wife.

"You might 's well hev 'em!" benevolently. "I don't care to take the trouble o' pickin' of 'em over to-night; I'm that beat out with the company, 'n' everything! An' I've got a garding full of 'em besides. I presume likely they'll come up quite handsome if you clip the stems when you git home 'n' put 'em in fresh water, an' set your parlor out real pretty for nigh 'pon a week to come. Good-night, agin!"

"I think there is a palpable mistake in the translation of one passage of Holy Writ," Mr. Lee began to say deliberately and conversationally, in his usual key, as they turned away. 'Who endeavored patiently *the contradiction of sinners*' should, I am positive, be rendered 'the patronage of fools.' *That* is the crucial test of discipleship, priesthood, and the apostolic calling!"

His wife gave a dry, hysterical sob, and pinched his arm.

"She'll hear you, dear!" she whispered.

"She wouldn't comprehend if she did! It has been a hard evening for you, my pet. I wish I could spare you such ordeals, but they are a part of the ministry of reconciliation, as man has improved upon the Almighty's design. You are a brave, true wife to carry your end of the cross so patiently."

"If I could but feel—but things are too much out of joint to be straightened by two pairs of hands. How sweet the air is! I was blind and dizzy in that stuffy, steaming room rank with the smell of new carpets and varnished furniture, and *reeking* with scandal. Rufus, do you suppose there was one grain of truth in that pestiferous garbage about *her?*"

She lowered her voice, for they were nearing the gate of Mrs. Fitchett's next-door neighbor.

"My blessed little simpleton! do I suppose that the moon—'bright regent of the heavens'—is made of Roquefort cheese?"

Two figures stepped from behind a pillar of the open gateway, out upon the sidewalk, and confronted them.

CHAPTER X.

THE past few weeks had been filled with excitement and rapturous surprises for Hollis Lee. A project, conceived by Mr. Phelps during the fortnight of Adirondack companionship, and remotely hinted at in one of their later interviews at that date, had assumed form and active life since the return of the exile to his home. He had taken an especial fancy to the handsome young fellow from the first, and this was heightened, not lessened, by Paul's departure.

It was thought best that the student, whose curriculum had been that of foreign schools and universities, should be prepared for the different methods of an American college by a few weeks of acclimatization under a Yale tutor. To this end, he had gone to New Haven in August, engaged an efficient "coach," and was, as he reported at home the two Saturday evenings he had permitted himself to enjoy with his family—"working like the handle of a town-pump." Richard's scheme, originally broached half in jest, and commending itself to him with thoughtful discussion, was a co-partnership with the brother of the Freehold clergyman. In the law-business which would doubtless flow back to the old office occupied by his father, the late Judge Phelps, and then by Richard for nearly two years, he would find a bright junior invaluable. He did not mean to drudge into the seventies, as did many

of his compeers, as his father had shortened his life by doing. It was somewhat problematical if his reinstated health would bear the northern winters as yet. Yet a practice must be built up and kept for Paul. The father was amazed at the might with which local associations, almost dormant during the term of his expatriation, drew upon his heartstrings. He resumed possession of the renovated homestead and met his old neighbors with exuberant delight that brought back the glow and hopes of youth. His son, he vowed, should never be an absentee. He would make a nest so inviting, a niche so honorable for his occupancy, that Paul would seek no other residence than the town his ancestors had founded, no more ambitious career than his father had opened up for him.

It was with the step and flush of a boyish victor, that Richard walked up the avenue in company with Hollis Lee, on the afternoon of the Fitchett tea-party, and presented him to his wife, who met him, as usual, on the piazza, as "the junior member of the law firm of Phelps and Lee."

"It is settled then!" said the lady, kindly proffering her hand for the nervous grasp of her husband's favorite. "Have I the honor of being the first to wish the copartnership all the success it deserves?"

"She puts everybody at ease!" Hollis thought for the hundredth time, feeling the warm clasp and meeting the motherly eyes.

Every drop of his blood was tingling smartly with excitement; a perpetual electric battery was sending new, strange life through his veins. His business ambitions, his social aspirations had never soared higher

than the pinnacle on which he felt himself to be standing securely and at ease. So much had been gained in so short a time that hopes yet more fond and daring reached eagerly toward fulfilment.

The preposterous had become the reasonable, the unexpected was the only probability.

"You are too good to me—all of you!" he faltered, the while he glanced around for the other and most important part of the "all." "I hope—I shall try never to prove unworthy of your confidence. But it seems like a dream!"

Paul, his first friend, was far away. That may have been one reason why he missed the sister more than he had supposed he would, should she not be with her mother to greet him. His cup was full and sweet. Her actual presence would but cast a sparkle down to the golden bottom of the chalice. There were no dregs, no unrefined lees.

Richard took him up to his own dressing-room to wash his hands and brush his hair before dinner. They had lingered so late, talking over final arrangements at the office, there was no time for Hollis to go home to dress.

"One would think this was New York, at the height of the season!" the host had said when the other demurred at presenting himself before the ladies in his business suit. "You look cool. That is the main consideration in this weather—and"—laughing pleasantly—"you are always a stylish fellow, even in your fishing-gear."

The boy had never been upstairs in this house before. To his sensitized imagination, the privilege

was a long, quick stage toward closest intimacy. He was already made almost one with the household. The so-called dressing-room was a fair-sized chamber with a polished floor, oak inlaid with walnut. Marble bath-tub, shower-bath, foot-bath and lavish store of towels, from Turkish crash up to damask—were at one end. A bamboo lounge, a dressing-bureau, a chiffonier, and half-a-dozen chairs were the bulk of the furniture, but the effect of the whole was such spaciousness and luxury to one used to the modest appointments of parsonage-life, that he stood looking about him with half-awed and altogether pleasurable curiosity when Mr. Phelps had left him with the injunction to "make himself at home, and to come down when he was ready." It agreed with his sense of fitness that the girl he loved should be environed with comforts and beauties the need of which was unknown to him personally. One of her charms was a nameless and subtle congruity with all that went with her fair, affluent life. His spirits would have ebbed desolately had he been unhopeful of his prospective ability to continue all these things to her.

A portrait hung against the wall, opposite a lounging-chair, on the back of which lay a silk smoking-jacket. An excellent likeness of Mrs. Phelps, in the creamy white gown her husband liked. The steadfast nobility of her visage, the benign eyes that watched him as they might Paul, the sweet, pensive lines of the lips that had never moved ungently in his sight—wrought upon him to a singular result. Turning the key noiselessly in the door, he approached the

picture and bent knee and head, as at a Madonna's shrine.

"If GOD gives your child to me!" said his heart, "I swear to love and serve and worship her as you would have her beloved and cherished—to make her wifehood as happy, as glorious a thing as yours is!"

He added aloud, "So help me GOD!" in rising; then, the New England part of him abashed at the dramatic impulse that had borne him so far beyond his habitual self, he hurried through his ablutions, brushed his clothes, and arranged his cravat at a cheval-mirror in three hinged compartments, each reflecting the lithe figure that stood before the central glass. He took deliberate advantage of the novel opportunity offered him for seeing all sides of a subject as interesting as that now presented. He was remarkably free from personal vanity—as men go—but he extracted sincere gratification from the assurance that the clean-limbed, well-built and well-featured youth in trig summer costume, reflected with frank fidelity in the triple mirror, need not fear inspection from any angle of observation. He was in the humor to make the best of himself just now, from a variety of motives, the chiefest being his love for Salome Phelps. He could never be worthy of her, but, with heaven's help, he might approximate, in time, what he supposed was her ideal.

He ran lightly downstairs when he had heard Mr. Phelps precede him to the lower floor. Salome was talking with her father opposite the front-hall door, her form framed by the arching vines and massive pillars. Her gown was white and sheer, bound at the

waist with a silken scarf of dead gold. A level bar of sunshine—golden with purple shadows—fell upon the cincture, and, following its lines, seemed to wind lovingly about her. In the girdle was a single burning bright Jacqueminot rose. The boy actually passed his hand over his eyes, as if partially blinded, in going forward to greet her.

Her face was radiant at sight of him, her answering advance girlishly impulsive.

"Papa has been telling us the good news," she said, shaking hands with him as heartily as her mother had done. "It is the most agreeable arrangement all around that could be imagined, and will be simply perfect when the duet is made a trio by Paul's admission to the firm. And it will always remain, 'Phelps and Lee!' Musically monosyllabic, with, as Mr. Edmund Sparkler would say, 'no nonsense about it.' Clients cannot resist the combination. The nicest part of it all is that it makes you one of us, you know—*almost* a member of the Phelps family."

Mrs. Phelps raised her handkerchief to brush away a smile at the naïve and unexpected climax. Richard saw nothing equivocal in a declaration of what jumped with his own mood. He was ready to adopt the promising lad. That Salome should be sisterly was no more than he wished. Like the vast rank and file of fathers, he would never suspect that his daughter was marriageable until his eyes were rudely opened to the fact by a much younger and less attractive man. And then, the discovery that the inferior being was preferred by her to himself would be a heavier blow than the actual parting with the girl who had given

evidence of such wretched taste. If his fellow-townspeople had possessed one tithe of the knowledge of human nature they prided themselves upon, they would not have accused him, in after-days, of forwarding the union. A matchmaking father would be a clumsy anomaly.

The lover's head was light with rapture; he trod upon air with winged heels. He was but three-and-twenty on his last birthday.

They dined at half-past six, in a lofty room, cool with shade that had been carefully preserved there all day without banishment of fresh air. The courses were distinct and ordered with just regard to season and sequence, from the clear soup to the faintly-tinted ices redolent of the sunny side of just gathered peaches. Before there was need of artificial light, the little party returned to the piazza, where, as Mrs. Fitchett had reported, Mrs. Phelps made tea and Turkish coffee.

Richard brought out cigars with this last.

"We can't have smoking in our office," he said, with his frank, merry laugh. "Old Freehold is too strong for Young America, there! Smoking, drinking, gambling—are done up in one and the same bundle of death by my worthy fellow-citizens. I never defend the weed in their presence. I doubt if three men and ten women in town know that I am guilty of the practice. Why, only to-day I listened with manfest, if tacit, approval to the story of the persecuted parson over the Connecticut line who refused to receive a cent of salary that was acquired by raising and selling tobacco crops. He lost his church

thereby. Let us hope he saved somebody's soul by stubborn adherence to his principles. Now—daughter, for our twilight music!"

If Hollis Lee could have peeped through the wire window-screens into the Gehenna of the Fitchett banquet, just at its height while he sipped his coffee and puffed lazily at his Havana, Salome's exquisite rendering of Schubert and Mendelssohn flooding moonlighted spaces, fragrant with concordant sweetness, he would have given a pitying sigh to the blameless martyr of the scene. Contrast could hardly have enhanced his happiness. While the sister-in-law, to whom each influence of his ecstatic hour would have been like water from the remembered Well of Bethlehem, parched and shrivelled in slow torture, he drank in bliss with the arrogance of youth and inexperience, accepting it as his birthright.

Ah! how many tales of other love-draughts, quaffed as thirstily and fearlessly, would the dumb white columns and whispering vines of the ancient colonnades have revealed, had human senses been fine enough to interpret their language!

The third white gown, "spotted" by Mrs. Tom Johnston, belonged to Mrs. Lupton. Rex had a business engagement, and Gerald was deep in his lessons, and the children were in bed, and she was *ennuyée* to death! Thus she made known her pitiable case.

"As if you need apologize for giving us pleasure!" said Mrs. Phelps, in playful chiding. "You want some coffee, I know. I had your especial cup and saucer brought out in prescience of your arrival. Only, I expected you earlier!"

Mrs. Lupton's figure was fuller than when we last saw her, but still fine; her cheeks had rounded into more girlish outlines. Seen in the moonlight as she sat in a wicker-chair, to which most people objected because "it threw them too far back," with her white draperies flowing free and far, the shapely hands toying with her cup while she hearkened to the music, no one could think of her as the widow of a man over fifty years of age, the mother of five children, and the step-parent of Rex Lupton.

"A graceful study!" Richard murmured under his breath, as he set his cup down on the stand by his wife.

She smiled, with an assenting gesture of appreciation. Hollis followed suit with his emptied cup, and—

"Pretty as a picture—isn't she?"

The smile now was a low laugh, at which the "Study" turned slow, lamping eyes of inquiry upon her friend.

"Only suppressed applause, my dear!" was the answer. "I foresaw that it was inevitable when I put you just there. The applause, I mean—*not* the suppression."

"She *does* play remarkably well to-night—even for her! Her touch is inimitable!" remarked the *trainante* accents.

They all laughed—still softly, not to lose the music, at the consummate pretence of misconstruction of their meaning, Richard clapping his hands noiselessly.

Hollis was used, by now, to the pretty nonsense-

play for which these people, rich and refined, had talent and leisure. It was very unlike the hard work, the economies, and the noisy although good children in his brother's house, but it suited his taste. He seemed to have waited and longed all his life for this sort of association, and found the fulfilment more enchanting than his ignorant dreams. How Ethel—the pale, sweet-faced "sister-in-heart," as she called herself to him—would enjoy it all! The thought recurred again and again, in the midst of his happiness.

He owed more, in some respects, to Ethel than to the mother whose home he had left, at fifteen, for the boarding-school where ministers' sons were prepared for college at half-price, in consideration of sundry services in garden, school-rooms, and stables, which "beneficiaries" were expected to perform. Somehow ministers contrive to send their boys to college, if they half-starve and quite overtask themselves to do it. Rufus and Hollis Lee's mother had brought up and helped educate four sons, and buried two daughters while babies in graves for which she could not afford to get tombstones. She had "faculty" of the best Yankee stamp, and her manner of "doing for her folks," was commended by the most critical of the parishioners. The New Hampshire hill-parish was bleak and stony, the salary small and irregularly paid. Even "faculty" in feminine hands could not reshingle the parsonage when the roof leaked, or drain a cellar that got into an unaccountable trick of dampness after mountain rains. Mrs. Lee's busy feet left imprints on the oozy floor whenever she went

down for wash-tubs, or potatoes, or milk, and she told Hollis, when he came home for his summer vacation, that she had been obliged to move her bed to the other side of her chamber "to get away from the drip." The boy's heart smote him to-night, in recalling how little heed he paid to the teasing "hack" he could hear, at night, through the partition, and how cruelly careless was his merry raillery upon "mother's" increasing thinness.

"You won't be able to throw a shadow by this time next year, if you go on in this way!" he said, when he took leave to go back to school.

The academy that offered such favorable terms to the sons of the prophets was one hundred and fifty miles from the hill-parsonage, and the snows that winter were unusually deep even for New Hampshire. When his father wrote to Hollis of his mother's death on the last day of the year, he added that, in consideration of the expense, the distance, and the inclemency of the season, his "dear son" would better remain "in meek resignation" where he was. His mother "had met death as she had life, patiently and bravely, and was now in the enjoyment of eternal rest." The husband was sincerely distressed by "the dispensation," and being a bookish man, with, as the parish put it, "no head for every-day work," he suffered such straits with the youngest son, the only child left at home, for the lack of the common decencies of domestic life, that the stirring sisters of the church and society married him, out of hand, to a smart "widow-woman, with quite some money of her own." At Hollis's next vacation, he found her installed

in the stead of the shadowy woman whose rule, however strict he had been wont to think it, was ease and peace and love compared with that of her shrill-tongued, strong-armed successor. One of the provisions of the informal but binding marriage contract was that she should not be "bothered with more than one of the children at a time." Hollis spent his vacations thereafter with his brother Rufus, who was married and settled in a village on the left side of the Hudson. Since the removal of the clergyman's family to Freehold Hollis had lived with them, giving such help as a brave heart and ready hands could offer to the only sister he had ever known. For over a year past he had paid board, having, aided by Rufus's influence, gained a slight foothold in his profession among the cautious Freeholders.

Whatever of social tact and ease of manner he had was due to Ethel's training. The ladyhood transmitted through four generations of gentlefolk wears well and seldom needs repairing. Mrs. Phelps's breeding was not finer in grain than that of the brow-beaten pastoress, who kept one "girl," and turned her last winter's gowns without the aid and counsel of a dressmaker. If the dew sprang sometimes to the quick, bright eyes, when Hollis saw Paul kiss his mother, he was oftener reminded of Ethel by the matron's gentle graciousness of demeanor, her unvarying refinement of diction, her thought for others and forgetfulness of self.

He mused of these things silently, while the moonlight dreamed on vines and lawn, and nestled among the moveless folds of Mrs. Lupton's draperies, and

the river-breeze lingered to hear the "twilight music." Some day, he resolved, he would say it all to Mrs. Phelps, and ask her to befriend the tender creature whose surroundings were so ungenial. The story of homely privations and sordid cares might not be suited for Salome's ears, but her mother would understand—as she did everything!

When the musician ceased playing and joined herself to the group without, it parted into two sections, separated by the hall-door. On one hand were Mrs. Phelps, her daughter and Hollis; Richard had picked up his chair and carried it over to Mrs. Lupton's side.

Without stooping to flirtation, the charming widow appreciated the advantages of a semi-confidential chat with a handsome, agreeable man—an old friend, too, to whom she could appeal for advice in the quandaries that beset one in her position. She never flaunted her loneliness as a distress-signal to chivalric manhood, but she did not let them overlook it. Her affliction had left her gentler, more in charity with the world; had rounded the angles of a character Richard used not altogether to approve, in former days. To-night she was very attractive in a sort of chastened cheerfulness, a rare phase as he knew her. After some minutes of congenial converse, he found himself intimating his satisfaction with the change.

"I am just learning to do you justice, I believe," he confessed with habitual ingenuousness. "There was a time when I was not in full sympathy with my wife's warmth of admiring regard. I used to think you cynical. Your *jeux d'esprit* were dashed with

pessimism ; you praised with qualifications. Do you suspect, I wonder, how you have been ripened and mellowed and beautified by the years that have detracted from the personal charms of the rest of us? I am such an old friend that I may tell you this."

"If I were pessimistic I should accuse you of angling for a compliment—" the effulgent eyes outdoing the modest moonbeams. "I was always too just to impute petty motives to *you*. No! don't speak, if you are about to contradict me! As you say, we have known one another long enough to be perfectly candid. And you really mean that *she*"—lifting a delicate finger slightly to indicate of whom she spoke, and letting her voice fall into a still more confidential key—"is attached to me? That makes me far happier than anything else you have said!"

She reclined on the sloping chair-back with a just audible sigh of satisfaction, and did not offer to speak again for a moment. She appeared to be absorbing and assimilating what he had given.

Richard's forehead burned. His fair interlocutor might be the soul of candor, but she was seldom rude. Yet what did her remark betoken unless that the suggestion of his wife's liking for her weighed more with the fascinating neighbor than the assurance of his approval and admiration? Some men enjoy listening to praises of their wives, if only as indirect tributes to their taste. There never lived or breathed the husband who relished such laudation when it put himself in a secondary place. Woman was made for man, not man for woman. In the swift thought of that pause, Mr. Phelps revoked the pretty things he had

said aloud and mentally, within the half-hour, of his impulsive friend.

"Because"—she resumed, in the cream-like flow of syllables he had thought musical a while ago—"it is your nature to like people, and to do them the justice—or favor—of letting them know when you are friendly. You give a benevolent disposition partial play, at least. That is one—among the many—secrets of your popularity with all classes. *She*"—the little gesture again defending the pronoun from suspicion of the vulgarity that often attends upon its use—"keeps the sweet secret of her preference to herself, as her bonny daughter will 'Love's young dream,' when it visits her. I have never been sure that the mother was more fond of one person than another, when once the sacred family pale is passed. That is—with two exceptions. She does my stately step-son the honor of distinguished partiality for him above all other young men, and she poured out a vast river of affection upon the poor girl who loved him. Maybe, because she *did* love him. Or—" yet more slowly—"because he loved her. The affair was a triangle. Isosceles, if you like. Did you suspect that I knew that much geometry?"

"I don't know that I suspect it yet!" The curt laugh was not suave. "Which two sides were equal to each other, and unlike the third?"

"That is a problem of your own asking. He who propounds should be able to answer. What a thoroughly nice youth that is over there! Being in such different social cliques, or rather being myself in none at all, of late years, I never guessed, until

recently, what an acquisition he is to the brief list of Freehold beaux."

"He is a good fellow, and, as you say, a gentleman,"—absently.

She let him ponder—or sulk—longer than a duller woman would. He must begin talking again of something, presently, being her host, and she awaited her cue. The night was divine; she liked her *chaise-longue;* the view of black tree-clumps against glistening roofs and spires, with the silver-white ribbon of the river defining the curves and indentations of the thither-side meadows, was more extensive than that afforded by her own portico. She liked beauty in nature and in art wherever found, and at whatever cost.

Richard tugged hard, but not agitatedly, at his drooping blonde moustache for a prolonged, discontented minute.

"And—so you think," he began—"that I wear my heart upon my sleeve?"

"By no means! Nor am I a daw. The question is not of *your* heart, but of your wife's. I am not prone to effusiveness, but I say it in all sincerity of feeling that I would rather have her cordial esteem than the passionate devotion of any one else I know. Her love would be the highest compliment I could receive. Men don't conceive such attachments for men as, now and then, one woman cherishes for another. I fell hopelessly in love the first time I met her, and am more enamoured to-day than I was yesterday. That is the reason why I detested the woman she *did* love—so well that she has never suspected

my worship. I was as jealous of that beautiful, brilliant girl as you were, and for a like cause."

"I! I was never jealous of her—or of anybody else!"

"No?" In the moonlight that had, by now, crept up to her face, he saw the arched eyebrows, the smile of faint, fine derision. "I have repeatedly declared you to be a unique among husbands. Do you recollect how I once betrayed you into the confession that you did not like—we won't call names for fear of being overheard—but the woman who hated me, as I her? We three,—the object of my dislike, the object of our common devotion, and I—made another isosceles triangle. You, my sighing step-son,—her swain,—and she, another. There was not an equilateral in the lot. She and he—'*elle et lui*'—loved one another. You had an antipathy to both. Peculiar—wasn't it?"

"Uncommonly!" Richard's laugh was dryly husky, his fingers were twisted in his moustache. "I begin to have faith in your mathematical abilities. Every interview astounds me by the exhibition of some novel accomplishment, hitherto undreamed of. In the words of the hymn,—

"'Where will the growing numbers end?'"

"*Don't* be commonplace when I have pronounced you a unique! Mr. Phelps!" with a sudden keen concentration of suspicion in face and altered tone—"who was the man whom that girl expected to meet in Albany?"

"Great heavens! what do you mean?"

"If you were not in her confidence, no one was!

She had a reason for accepting the man she intended to marry. Yes! I think there is no doubt she meant to honor our family thus far. "Dishonor" is not a word for ears polite or for those of a husband who made a love-match, and believes in the sanctity of such. So, we will not speculate as to what would have followed the interview with this nameless lover, had not Providence first given her you as a watch-dog, and then put the mistaken creature out of the reach of temptation."

Richard's face was blank with amazement.

"Upon my soul, you are dealing in riddles—"

"I know it! The only key to the mystery is that the gallant, gay Lothario was a Baltimorean.—What is it, Salome, dear?"

The girl had called her name in her clear, soft voice, un-American in quality and pitch.

"Mr. Lee is telling us of his sister-in-law, the cousin of our friend, Anna Marcy, whom you remember. She is certainly a candle in the wrong socket."

"A *candle!* Miss Marcy?" her voice tremulous with stifled laughter.

"How awkward of me!" Richard understood, and Hollis Lee suspected, the covert allusion in Mrs. Lupton's amused interjection, to Anna's personal defect, but it was lost upon single-minded Salome. "No! Mrs. Rufus Lee! Think of a *lady* by birth and breeding, condemned to familiar association with rich vulgarians—"

"And the vulgar poor?" The creamy tones slid in another languid query.

"One could bear that better, for she could pity, if

not elevate *them.* But, fancy being hectored, and tutored, and *patronized* by Mrs. Fitchett!"

"The dreadful mother of a more dreadful daughter!" said Hollis, parenthetically.

"She should have sat down and counted the cost before she decided to marry an Orthodox minister, my dear girl. And having done even this, she should have resisted unto blood his intention to settle in Freehold."

"In that event, we should never have had the privilege of knowing her—as we hope to do—and the opportunity of making her lot less hard—as we mean to begin doing forthwith!" Salome pursued, undaunted. "You must know that she is, at this instant, undergoing the *peine forte et dure* of a parochial tea-party!" A tea-fight!" Mr. Lee tells me it is called, and hopes she will come out with her life. Mrs. Fitchett's dining-room is the battle-ground. The compassionate brother-in-law predicts that they will have all the gas-burners lighted, and all sorts of fried hot things to eat—"

"And all on the table at once—most of them in sauce-plates!" interpolated Mrs. Lupton, with gloom born of experience. "I know whereof I speak. I once counted the small, deep plates encircling the big shallow one from which I was expected to take the more substantial part—the *motif*—of the meal. There were eight! I could think of nothing but my small brother's first essay at chicken-raising, when he set ten eggs more than Dame Partlet could cover. He said he 'wanted to see the old lady *spread herself!*' But go on, sweet Innocence!"

Hollis shouted with laughter.

"You couldn't have hit upon a happier figure, Mrs. Lupton. And my little sister will be commanded to inspect and praise each egg. The sequel of every such 'spread' is a headache that keeps her in bed all of the next day."

"Papa, darling!" Salome went on, coaxingly, "I want to go down to the gate when the festivities are over. Mr. Lee says ten o'clock, struck from the Old North Hill spire, is curfew to all right and pious Freeholders, so truce must be proclaimed at tea-fights about nine. Mr. Lee will go with me and introduce me to his brother and sister, and we will bring them up here for a quiet, social half-hour. I do long to have mamma lay her hand in benediction (figuratively, of course) on that lovely little lady's head, and make her feel that she is once more among her own kind!" pleaded the girl, thoughtless of the fetters she was welding upon a man's heart, and the suspicions her earnestness was kindling in a woman's mind. "I promised Anna that we would be very neighborly with her cousin, and Mr. Lee says she does not feel that she has any claim upon us, so hesitates to make the first call."

"The inquisitors will arraign her in the Star-Chamber, if she crosses your door-stone!" Mrs. Lupton averred, melodramatically. "I am not sure as to the unity of the figure, or if Star-Chamber and Inquisition were contemporaneous, but I am positive of the fact that she will be hauled over the coals by every tabby and grimalkin in the parish, until she'll wish she had been born a four-footed

church-mouse, with a handy hole in the vault to hide in. "What took you to see the Phelpses?" one will ask. Another—"Hain't you work enough in your own parish to do, but you must be kitin' reaound with them as hez never hed no c'nection with aour church—'n' sassiety?" Mr. Lee, there is a discord of consciousness in your laugh! You know I am a true prophet. Take my advice, and don't change snarling to biting dogs."

This speech angered Richard unconscionably. It was inexplicable that so clever a woman of the world as Mrs. Lupton should make herself so nearly disagreeable as she had done several times this evening. Interference with the private affairs of her best friends could never be less than impertinence, as she would be quick to remark were another the offender. She might comprehend that, having set up his household gods in Freehold, he had identified himself with the people of his native place; that who touched them and the church of his fathers, assailed him.

"*I* will go with you, Hollis, to meet your friends," he said with grave dignity, rising. "There goes nine o'clock now! We will light another cigar apiece, and stroll on the lawn in sight of the gate until they leave Mrs. Fitchett's door."

"Thank you!" gratefully—from Salome, who hastened to bring a match from the stand and light her father's cigar, receiving a kiss in repayment.

Hollis obeyed his senior's motion with so good a grace as to draw from Mrs. Lupton the remark, when he was out of earshot:

"There is game blood in that young barrister!

One might have supposed him entirely satisfied with the exchange of the daughter's for the father's society."

"I agree with you in believing in his gentle breeding," said Mrs. Phelps quietly, "but I fancy, if the truth were known, he does not need the consolation of the cigar. Richard has taken him into partnership in his business, and their heads are full of it. It was settled only this afternoon."

"Indeed!" There was no doubting her genuine interest in the news. "That looks like your permanent residence! I am delighted!"

Mrs. Phelps's acute ear detected the check put upon the cautious tongue at the last word. The sustained inflection betrayed that something was kept back.

The owner of the tongue bit it in reflecting how near she had come to subjoining—"What a lift for the Lees!"

Something in the intent poise of Salome's head, the motionless yet alert figure standing on the step where her father had left her, by the column that was gray against her snow-white gown, bespoke earnestness of attention in what the two matrons were saying. She was then "interested" in this "young barrister"! For a second, the cool-headed observer's emotion was one of profound contempt for father, mother, and for the daughter who "might do so much better"—and of admiration for the open-faced youth, born in one country parsonage and resident in another, who had played for such high stakes and won.

"Every one to his taste!" was her second thought.

"If they have a fancy to bring up the heiress' husband by hand, it is their affair—and the business of the Freehold gossips. So long as she does not take a romantic fancy to Rex, why should I care?"

Quickly and noiselessly as the unuttered thought, Salome glided from the pillar to the chair her father had vacated, and took the lady's hand in fingers which, the other felt, quivered nervously.

"Dear Mrs. Lupton! you could not have been in earnest when you said that association with us would hurt the Lees in their own parish! Anna Marcy told us all about this dear little woman,—how lovely, and how lonely, and how *good* she is! I could hardly credit her story of the bondage of church connection in this part of the world until Mr. Hollis Lee confirmed it. Surely here, in papa's birthplace, where he is so much beloved, our friendship would be a help, as well as a solace. Mamma thinks so, too."

"Mamma is nearer right than you or I, nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand, my dear!" gently chafing the fingers into stillness, and noting how pure and firm was the flesh, how smooth the skin, how perfect their taper to the tips, and that they were ringless. "But I know my congeners and their 'affinities' better than she ever can. Freeholders are a people of manifold traits, and each trait is as pronounced as if it had the whole stamping-ground to itself. One of them is a jealousy of encroachment upon their territory. Each 'church 'n' sassiety' preserves the pastor's family as the English their game. They will not tolerate poaching. If you invite Mrs. Lee to your house, and make much of

her and enjoy her,—if you find her husband's company agreeable, and (while attending another church) admit him as a welcome and frequent visitor, you are a poacher, claiming what belongs to other people by right of purchase and support. Mr. Hollis Lee will make his own place in society and the world—being unsalaried by the parish. That it will be a good one, goes without saying. He has all the requisites of success. It would be truer kindness in your family not to seek to be intimate with his relatives."

"But—" the eyes Mrs. Lupton thought were troubled or uneasy, following her mother's motions as she directed the removal of the tea-table and equipage, then settling upon a rift in the vines through which the moon looked back at her—"what if we were to take a pew in their church? Papa said something to that effect the other day."

"I am afraid that would not help the matter. Mrs. Fitchett and her colleagues would raise the cry of favoritism."

She spoke kindly and soberly, watching the girl narrowly. The question under debate went very deep with the child, evidently. The fingers quivered again, then were held still, by a direct and palpable exercise of will. Her lips were parted for further protest, when hasty steps crunched the gravel in the opposite direction to that in which the prospective partners had strolled. A long shadow shot athwart the moonlit floor. Salome arose, tranquil and smiling, as her mother said "Good-evening!" to Rex Lupton.

His manner was unusually animated and joyous.

"You received my note, Isabel—did you not?" he

turned to her to say, the salutations to the others being over. "I dined—or supped—down-town, and did not get away from the office until ten minutes of nine. Mrs. Phelps! may this young lady walk with me in the rose-garden for a little while? It is such a glorious night, and I have been caged for twelve hours!"

"If the 'little' is not made long," answered the mother. "Explain to him, as you walk, my daughter, why you must be back in time to receive our guests—should they come."

"I am duly grateful for the 'if.'" Rex had brought a white shawl and lace scarf from the hall, and was hurrying them on Salome. "Now, we'll set sail for Araby the blest! Cannot you signal us, Mrs. Phelps, when the expected vessels heave in sight? We will keep a look-out at the mast-head."

Did the step-mother's ears deceive her? Who was the lively rattle, the audacious gallant, who bore off his prize amid badinage of nautical slang? Had she not known him so well she would have believed he had taken too much wine with his club-dinner.

"Ah! the blessed elasticity of youth!" she sighed enviously, leaning forward to watch the retreating forms. "Were I in that dear boy's place, I should long for nothing on earth or in heaven but my pillow and ten hours' sleep, while the mere fact that a hard day's work is done reacts upon him like good news from a far country. Croakers tell me he is over-wrought by care and toil. Sometimes I am conscience-stricken at the thought that I and the children entail the burden upon him. I need not be seriously uneasy

when he brings such spirits from the severest week's labor he has had for a year. This is the winding-up of the dull season at the Works, the time when they 'take account of stock,' and find out what has been made or lost in the past twelvemonth."

"The result would seem to be pleasant, judging from Rex's mood."

"My dear! when you have lived as long in the house with that—*Runic* being, you will not predicate anything upon the testimony of his moods and tenses. He is Bonnivard—self-chained to the pillar of Duty, wearing a "pathlet" (that's what the brave Swiss called it), a '*vionnet*,' in the stone floor. Rex seems altogether content with his '*vionnet*.' He has worn it so deep that he can just see over the edge by standing on tiptoe. He is on tiptoe to-night. The 'tramp! tramp!' and the rattle of the chain will recommence to-morrow. Heigho!" another and deeper sigh,—"we cannot all be born strong as was his father, with 'heart'—and hand—'for any fate!' And, if the iron be blunt, a man must lay to it more strength!"

CHAPTER XI.

RICHARD PHELPS met his new guests in his best manner. It was courtly—magnetic—affable—all that a warm-hearted gentleman who loved his neighbor as himself, an Abou Ben Adhem in nineteenth-century coat and trowsers and patent leather "Newport ties," should exhibit to those he wished to honor.

Mr. Lee succumbed to the spell at once, as his brother had foreseen. The two were talking together like old acquaintances by the time they reached the top of the hill. Denial of the request that they should come up to the house was impossible. The surprised couple were taken possession of incontinently, claimed as lawful prizes "won by a strategic flank movement," according to Mr. Phelps, and were in the gravelled path before they recovered their wits. Hollis gave Ethel his arm, enraptured at the success of the manœuvre.

"We have been lurking in ambush this half-hour, waiting for you!" he whispered, squeezing her hand against his bounding heart. "What kept you so long? Johnston, Emmons & Co."—such being the title of the wealthy firm of tanners and curriers—"passed the gate ten minutes ago."

In reality, it was not five, except by a lover's reckoning, but his sister-in-heart knew no better. It had

seemed twice ten minutes to her. She told things to Hollis she kept from her husband, and her worn nerves revenged themselves now for the trials of the evening in an irritable outbreak totally unlike her usual gentleness :

"That odious woman, who was more insufferable than ever all the evening, called us back when we had gone as far as the gate—as she might shout to a hostler and laundress—to force this withered rubbish upon us!" showing the tightly-bound sheaf of mixed flowers, bigger than a Drummond cabbage, and as gaudy as cheap furniture chintz. "She didn't care to be troubled to keep them alive, she said, as her 'garding' was full of fresh flowers, but I must clip the stems and put them in water, and decorate my parlors with them for the next week!" giggling tearfully, and so ashamed of the weakness that the tears threatened to get the better of laughter.

In a twinkling, the boy caught the unwieldy clump of blossoms from her disdainful hold, and sent them hurtling through the branches of the nearest tree.

"The only comment her insolence deserves!" he said, hotly. "Now, Ethel, dear, forget purgatory and prepare for paradise. This is *their* plot—not mine. They said there seemed to be no other way of inveigling you within their doors."

The hasty "aside" was all the preparation he could give her, for her husband and the master of the domain had halted to wait for them. Richard took her from the younger man with graceful authority, and escorted her up the three broad stone steps, at the head of which Mrs. Phelps was awaiting them.

"This is *very* good in you!" she said, in her full, earnest tones, that always carried to the unprejudiced listener conviction of sincerity. "Thank you, Hollis, for bringing them to us!" Transferring Mrs. Lee's hand into her left, she held her right out to the lady's husband.

"I hope you will pardon our bold stratagem, Mr. Lee. It was a good deal like a footpad's attack, but it seemed impossible to secure our ends by conventional means."

"I congratulate myself upon having a share in the result of the *coup*," said a mellow voice, and another hand-clasp awaited the strangers. "I am Mrs. Lupton"—forestalling Richard's motion of introduction. "Whoever takes the Phelps household as neighbors must accept me also."

The third white gown had vanished, as entirely as though the moonlight had absorbed it. Probably the wearer had gone into the house for a few minntes. Hollis was used to see her fly upstairs for her mother's fan, handkerchief or book; to be her hands, feet and voice in errands to kitchen, dining-room and pantry. He appreciated, while waiting, the warmth of the welcome given to his relatives, the freemasonry of fine breeding that made the two parties mutually aware of the homogeneity of the united group; saw Ethel take her rightful place with these thoroughly-refined women; noted with satisfaction that the "hail-fellow-well-met" tone and carriage his brother's flock mistook for "genteel" ease was moderated into courtesy almost equal to Richard's own. Rufus Lee had catered to parish taste too long and

sedulously to be quite as truly the gentleman as his younger brother. Perhaps the original texture was inferior in quality and sensitiveness. His wife had kept him from serious degeneration. If the change from the heat, glare and hubbub of the Fitchett "tea-fight" to the cool, subdued light in which these well-attuned spirits talked together in modulated tones, graciously deferential, each to the other's opinions and tastes—were a degree less grateful to him than to the weary woman, brightening under remembered influences, as sun-beaten flowers in dewy twilight, he yet liked being made much of in the "best circle" of Freehold. Few of his parishioners were in so much as the outer ring of it. The ease and rapidity with which he had reached the centre affected him somewhat as a whiff of chloroform might. It was lulling, exhilarating, idealizing. He studied his periods rather too carefully, and did not perceive that Richard never said "sir" to him, while his own use of it was frequent, but he surprised himself by feeling so soon "quite at home."

He might not be aware, but Ethel would have known, that his temper of mind was hardly manly, and accorded indifferently with the calm, self-respectful dignity of a clergyman who regarded all classes and conditions of men as so many souls in varying stages of development. He knew that he liked "nice" people, and nice people's houses and ways. Mrs. Phelps's graceful appeal to him, from time to time, on topics she assumed were better understood by him than by the others present; her husband's recognition of him as a man whom it was worth his

while to cultivate; the marked interest evinced by Mrs. Lupton in every word he uttered, might be only a different way of being hospitably agreeable from Mrs. Fitchett's boisterous patronage, but the one soothed, where the other irritated. He collared his inner man occasionally, and shook him hard, in assuring him that these were the ways of the world, and these people worldlings. He recollected, punctiliously, that they were not of his fold, and never would be; that their attentions to him merely indicated a desire to be on civil terms with the family of Mr. Phelps's business partner. He reiterated, warningly, the broad-faced widow's mimicry of the "Baltimore woman's" invariable affability, and became more fascinated with each flying minute.

Where was Salome all this time? Richard was too busy talking well and drawing others on to respond, to observe her absence. Mrs. Phelps could not leave her especial guest whom she had installed in a luxurious chair beside her own. Hollis grew silent and fidgetty, yet durst not venture a query. The hostess, who had the enviable gift of seeing all that went on about her, because she never lapsed into self-engrossment, telegraphed an adroit petition to her valuable neighbor.

"*Won't* you look up those heedless children?" said the arch of the right eyebrow and the slight depression of the left corner of her mouth revealed by the crystalline moonbeams.

"Compose yourself, my dear! I will bring them in!" answered the slow lift of both the dark brows above the finest eyes in town.

Mrs. Lupton's soft muslin ("*with* black ribbons, of course!") made no sound, her footfall little, as she passed, like consolidated moonlight, into the central hall, dimly lighted in warm weather, floated out upon the back porch, down the steps, and out into the garden alleys. At the far end of one, in the fullest flood of radiance, she at once espied those whom she sought. They were standing near together, their heads bent over something—a flower or shrub—talking in a low, but not especially confidential key. She approached without caution or misgiving. With the pre-conception of Hollis Lee's successful suit in her mind, she had not given an afterthought to Rex's invitation to the promenade and his evident familiarity with the ways of the household. He was coming out of his bereavement after a phenomenally long period of immersion. His high spirits were but the shake a half-drowned creature gives himself to shed the superincumbent wet.

Had she been never so suspicious Salome's gay simplicity would have disabused her of doubt.

"Come, Mrs. Lupton," she cried, before Rex perceived his step-mother, "and settle the dispute. Here is a morning-glory, the finest of its kind and season, wide open. Mr. Lupton will have it that it has outlived the heat of the day—*here!* where there is not so much as a sporadic glimpse of shade—and is now enjoying the reward of bravery and an exceptional constitution. *I* maintain that it has thought, as did Jessica, that this moon 'is but the daylight sick,' and opened its one big eye in the full persuasion that it is

time for a morning-glory who would keep abreast of the times to be up, if not doing."

"You remember the attempt made to scare a toper out of his evil courses by carrying him, while dead drunk, into a vault and leaving him there?" asked Mrs. Lupton, falling in readily with her lively rattle. "Your father used to tell the story, Rex. One little candle showed the fellow when he awoke where he was. He sat up in the open coffin, rubbed his eyes and stared around. 'Be blest if I ken rightly say whether I'm first riz, or mightily belated!' he said. That is the quandary of the convolvulus, I suppose. There is but one way to settle it. If 'belated,' the flower will bloom itself to death by morning. If 'first riz,' it will have several hours more to live."

"But," Rex interposed, looking from one to the other, still with the dancing light in his eyes that was unfamiliar to his step-parent, "How can I identify this among twenty others? If it should prove to be, as Miss Phelps contends it is, a '*moon*-glory,' she is quite capable of palming off another opened blossom —a 'belated' twin-sister—upon me as the original. Then we shall never know on whose side the phenomenon has declared itself."

"In betting-phrase, you want somebody to hold the stakes. Pull the flower, take it home, and set it on your balcony in a glass of water all night. When daylight comes, the 'glory' will speak for itself. A more imminent question is what excuse a pair of truants will have ready for not keeping their promise of coming in to meet Mr. Hollis Lee's friends. He had

but one button left on his coat when I came away to look you up, and was twitching at that, yet could not summon courage enough to ask for you, Salome."

With a dismayed exclamation, the girl was speeding back to the house when Rex, distancing Mrs. Lupton's more leisurely pace, overtook her.

"If you will excuse me I will not come in again. I have had a busy day, and there is a certain prospect of a busier to-morrow. I have the flower, you see, and hereby engage to deal honorably by it and you. I shall report on the resurrection—or demise—in the morning. Good-night."

His eyes, still lightful but no longer laughing, held hers, uplifted in ingenuous innocence, for a second; his fingers closed firmly upon her hand; he raised his hat to both the ladies and was gone, with long, springy strides across flower-beds and gravelled walks, down the grassy slope homeward. No inquiries were made concerning him when Mrs. Lupton and Salome emerged from the house upon the piazza. Only Mrs. Phelps knew in what company her daughter had lingered, and her discretion was a proverb.

Had Hollis Lee dreamed of the stroll in the alleys of the rose-garden, and the girl's forgetfulness of her promise to watch for his return, he would have borne a less buoyant heart back to the parsonage with him; might have gone straight to his own room when they arrived, instead of following his sister-in-heart to the nursery, whither she went to see that all was well with the three children.

Of them we may remark, in passing, that the biennial appearance of olive sprouts about the minister's

table was an offence to the economic sense of "the people," an average of one to each household being the decorous custom of the township.

Mrs. Lee was reversing the pillow of the year-old baby when she became aware that Hollis stood beside her. She glanced up, with an expectant smile on a face that was less tired than it had been an hour before.

"Well, my dear boy?"

"What do you think of *her?*" he blurted out, anxiously.

"I like your friends *exceedingly*. They are, in appearance and manner, all that you led me to expect, and more. If by 'her' you mean Miss Phelps, I think her very charming, unaffected, intelligent, winning, and better than pretty. She has a fine, sweet, bright face, if I could judge fairly by the moonlight, and resembles her mother in voice and carriage."

They were not prone to affectionate demonstration in the hard-worked New England family, but she put both arms about his neck and kissed him.

"God bless and prosper you in all things, dear! Whoever gets you should be happy."

The young fellow's handsome face flushed up to his brown curls. "I am sure of nothing myself, of course, as yet of her sentiments. I mean—I hope that some day I may feel that I have the right to tell her how it has been with me from the second day of our acquaintanceship. We had an afternoon service at Bartlett's that Sunday, and the two old duffers of D.D.'s, who conducted it, rattled off prayers and readings at such a rate that I lost my place irretrievably

within three minutes after we left the starting-post. So I pushed my chair back into a corner and watched her face, sweet and solemn, as she went through with it all. She wore a gray gown, with a big bunch of trailing arbutus tucked in the belt. I couldn't talk of her to anybody but you. Rufus wouldn't understand. Men never do until everything is definite and ready for announcement. I wanted you to know all about it, and to help me grow more fit to confess it to her when the time comes. So far as I can see, I have a clear field, but if there were a thousand competitors I would not yield it until I had my orders to retreat from her own lips."

Richard Phelps escorted Mrs. Lupton across the lawn, through the hedge, and along the winding-path, lately cleared out and re-laid to her door. Like all amiable—because fortunate—men and women, he had a spice of vindictiveness in his composition. Life had run on oiled wheels with him from his cradle-days; the generous evenness of his temper was so rarely disturbed by crosses or temptations, that he bore the one and resisted the other, under the disadvantages of him whom the enemy finds nodding at his post. This odd little woman had pricked his self-love until it bled. Furthermore, if she surmised that he was chagrined, she was, or feigned to be, totally unconcerned in the matter. The hot weather made her languid, she complained, and said little else during the short walk, even closing her teeth palpably upon a couple of yawns. He was not used to have people yawn while he was talking to them.

"It is too late to ask you in," she said, facing him

on her porch and letting fall the fleecy skirts she had held up with both hands from contact with grass and gravel. "Even were it proper, which it is *not*, and if you cared to come in, which you *don't*."

She looked so bewitching in the full flow of moon-rays pouring between the two great elms flanking the gate: the gleam of dazzling teeth, the flash of speaking eyes were so arch and tempting that he was provoked to gallant resistance of the sentence.

"I think I will not go until you have taken back some of the cruel things you said to me awhile ago," taking his stand against the door-post. "As I told you then, you have been enigmatical—almost unfriendly. How have I offended you? What have I done, and what left undone?"

"My dear Mr. Phelps! do recollect that I live nearer the street than you! What will Mrs. Grundy say if she chance to be peeping through the blinds of the house over the way, or rambling over the hill, and sees us standing less than a yard apart at 11 o'clock at night. You distract me!"

"Turn about is fair play. I have been distracted for one hour and a half. Retract, and I go! Refuse, and I defy Mrs. Grundy and all her emissaries!"

"I could not have said 'cruel things,'"—as piteously as a two-year-old—"because I never *thought* them! Please specify, and briefly. Oh! I am sure I hear the creak of the Grundyan shoes down the street!"

He could not be specific, when thus adjured. Her expression and emphasis had had more to do with his disquiet than her language. It was hardly cause for complaint that she had preferred his wife to himself—

for instance. And the silly gossip about Marion Bayard's Baltimore admirer was a thing he could not refer to without arousing suspicions on a subject that it were best not to disinter. This woman was trying to play with him as a cat with a mouse, with her alternate antagonistic and attractive influences. He chafed at her trifling, and was tempted to gallant retort by her home-thrusts. If she wanted to flirt, he was at her service to a certain extent; if war was her object, he would disarm her by courtesy. It would fare hard with him, if he, the veteran pet of her sex, could not parry the fence of a woman who had known no wider field of conquest than Freehold since she was twenty years old.

"Recapitulation would consume your valuable time, and be too painful to me," he pleaded. "Your conscience must recall that which pierced me to the heart."

"Commonplace—for the second time this evening! But I am glad I found a joint in the harness," she retorted, imperturbably, leaning easily against her side of the doorway, her eyes cool and dangerous as Damascus steel. "I thought, before I knew you so well, that there was none. You cannot expect the archer who has emptied his quiver to go around and pick up all the 'shafts at random sent.' Let me see! what did I chatter about while we were making talk in our moonlit square of the piazza? I praised your wife, but that was balm, not gall to your knightly soul. I decried Marion Bayard and insinuated ungenerous doubts as to her constancy to her plighted wooer. That I do retract! It is base to attack the

dead unless one has proof positive of his charge. Was it the isosceles triangle puzzle that you resented? Mathematics is an exact science, you know, and I write 'Q. E. D.' under most of my work. Have you anything else to ask?"

"Nothing! Except—" moving a half-step nearer, and dropping his bantering tone—"except to inquire if there is any reason why we should not be as good friends as ever, Mrs. Lupton. I do not pretend to comprehend your moods and veiled allusions. I am a blunt, straightforward man to those I really esteem, and I had hoped that, as your husband's old and trusted intimate, I had some claim upon your regard."

"You need not go so far as that to establish a claim, Mr. Phelps!" She, too, left off banter, looked gravely and directly at him. "That you are the loving and beloved husband of the woman I revere beyond all others would win for you consideration from me. If I were disposed to strike you 'to the heart,' as you have said jestingly (in questionable taste, allow me to say), she would be your shield. I think we have come to a full understanding. Now, if you will not go, I must. Good-night! and do not let your dreams get tangled up with my geometrical figures!"

He stood staring at the door she shut between them, for, perhaps, twenty seconds after she had flashed this adieu at him through the closing crack—a lightning gleam of dazzling teeth and eyes mocking, malicious—was it also menacing? Then he took his way slowly back, up the hillside to where the

white pillars of his ancestral pile lifted broad foreheads to the high moon.

His wife had not moved from her place on the portico. Salome had gone to her room.

"The night is so beautiful, that I could not bring myself to leave it," Mrs. Phelps said, as her husband trode somewhat heavily up the steps. "The shadows on the turf and floor are almost as sharp and clear as the silhouettes my grandmother used to cut out of black paper, and hold in the lamplight against the wall."

Her tone was tranquilly careless, the expression of figure and visage so placid and restful that the strangely-perturbed man stooped to kiss her in a passion of tenderness.

"Thank Heaven that I married you, my good angel, and not Isabel Lupton!"

She laughed—the sweet, girlish merriment he loved to hear.

"Mr. Lupton was grateful for the same mercy as long as he lived. What fresh occasion for thanksgiving has poor Isabel given? I thought her behavior to the Lees the perfection of breeding."

"Oh, nothing specific!" recalling his failure to adduce items. "But she was less accordant—more fantastic in humor and talk than usual, to-night. Conversation with her was a sensible strain upon patience and temper—at least to me. She is often entertaining—never reposeful. *That* is the unfailing charm of your society. You sustain without exciting, stimulate without taxing one's energies. One is so *sure* of you always and everywhere."

"You are very kind to think and to say it," she answered gently. "I do desire to be a comfort to you and the children."

"You are everything to me! If there is anything good in me, it is yours, by creation and preservation. The evil that remains is there in spite of the catholicon of truest womanhood and wifehood. Heavens! when I think what that word 'wifehood' implies in this connection—what you have done, and dared and suffered for me in the past six years, I feel that I am only fit to be one of your hired servants!"

He pushed back his hat and she saw that the moonbeams glistened upon great beads on his forehead; he champed his moustache fircely.

The wife turned with a sudden impulse and cast herself upon his breast, clung to him convulsively, shielded her eyes with her hand as she spoke. One might have believed that she dreaded lest he should read accusation there.

"Richard!" the rich voice strained and muffled. "If you have anything to tell that you think would shock or hurt me, say it now. There will never be a better time. I have imagined—I have been sure, sometimes, that there lay between us the shadow of an unexplained mystery—perhaps, of an unconfessed wrong or what you might consider as a wrong. There have been moments when you seemed to me to struggle between the sense of what you owed to yourself and to me. Dear! there can be no conflict! We are one, and neither can have a sorrow or a strife apart from the other. I know how strong temptation is, and how weak the best of us are, when the guard

is down for never so short a minute! You told me once—and with truth—that I would be an intolerant judge of certain forms of human weakness. That was long, long ago, when I did not know life as well as I do now. I hope I have grown more tender, more charitable, through my own mistakes and suffering. However that may be I am stronger than you think—and I *have* tried to be a good wife. Not always successfully, GOD knows, but I mean to keep on trying until death parts us—my *husband!*"

She uttered it rapidly, with passion that was coherent, but so powerful that the astonished listener doubted the evidence of his ears. The remark that had called forth the unprecedented outburst was, for all thought and intention of his, of the most general application imaginable. He had recollected, on a night fraught with romantic and sentimental influences, what the noble wife sitting on the moonlighted porch of his dwelling had been to him,—her fidelity, her patience; her skill in nursing; her vivacious chat in his weary hours; her forbearance with his humors and charity for his foibles—and said truly that he was not worthy of it all. As what man could be? Introspection was not his forte. Still less was contrition a common frame of mind with one whom his acquaintances conspired to spoil. Plausible with the world, he condoned his own peccadilloes more freely than any others. If his mind had been microscopically examined it would have appeared that he had never done anything that he believed was wrong, since he attained man's estate and responsibilities. He reasoned a question from all sides, con-

scientiously, before action upon it. He would have told you with the clear, straightforward look that won everybody's confidence, how honestly he strove to obey his convictions, and he would have uttered it in all sincerity. His deflections from right—if such existed—began farther back than he looked. The stream ran well, the banks were sound and the bottom clear. In such circumstances the sanitarian is exceptionally wise or fastidious who follows it all the way to the hidden spring far up the mountain-side, and there tests the quality of the water bursting from the soil or rock.

It is not enough to say that a man has the courage of his convictions, to make his cause good and just. A prior step should be to analyze the principles themselves. I dwell on this distinction because it simplifies much that perplexes casuists, and drives youthful students of human nature into pessimism. Not one man in a million deliberately does what he believes, at the moment of doing, to be sinful. We vindicate the ways of man to man (when we are the actors), more jealously than the ways of the Maker of us all, and the Judge of those who put good for evil and evil for good, light for darkness and darkness for light, bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

There was no affectation in Richard Phelps's stupefaction at listening to his wife's impassioned, and, as he considered, uncalled-for appeal to his conscience and candor, nor in the indignation which succeeded reflection. He admired and respected and loved her beyond all the rest of womankind, but even she, it would appear, was not superior to hysterical extrava-

ganzas. To say that men hate scenes is to descend to axiomatic platitude. To say that this particular man was especially averse to scenes is a tribute to his taste, and also expressive of his horror of being made individually uncomfortable. One secret of his wife's influence over him was her self-control; another, the skill with which she avoided disagreeable subjects, made his daily walks straight and smooth, and padded sharp corners. He had come to expect these offices from her—as he affirmed, to feel "*sure* of her," in all that pertained to his welfare.

The quivering pleader clinging to him was like a stranger, whose touch hardened. He would not be unkind. He could not be sympathetic.

"Madeline!" he said, judicially.

At the first accent she was brought to herself. A shudder ran over her that suspended breath for an instant; she raised herself and sat back in her chair, still shielding her eyes with her hand, and waited to hear more, with head bowed upon her breast.

"My dear child, are you raving? 'Mystery' and 'wrong' are strange words to be used by a wife to a husband. If you will formulate your indictment, I may be able to defend myself.'"

No reply from the drooping figure in the high-backed chair. Only the bowed head and hidden eyes, and a certain strain of attentiveness and waiting through all that augmented his displeasure. It said that definiteness of denial or disclosure was needed to satisfy her.

"After your frenzied inuendoes, it sounds tame for me to declare that my conscience does not cry out

upon me as the vilest of reprobates. To the best of my knowledge, I have been neither thief, libertine, nor perjurer, but a very decent, moral sort of fellow, as men and husbands go. Not a millionth part good enough for you! That I freely acknowledge, as I have, always. No man ever had a better wife, and few deserve such an one less than I. I am willing to affirm this upon oath. But of actual and intentional wrong against you, I am guiltless. Nor can I conceive what is the aim of the torrent of disconnected assertions of your loyalty and my possible infamy. May I demand an intelligible explanation?"

She did not lift her head, but the left hand joined its fellow in screening her eyes; both were pressed hard upon the closed lids; she drew deep, painful breaths that shook her to her feet. However chimerical might be her imaginings, she suffered intensely. Richard touched her and spoke more gently, but decidedly:

"Madeline! this is folly of the rankest sort! I never saw you behave in this way before. It is babyish and wicked—unworthy—utterly unworthy of you. Look at me!"

She obeyed, with dry, miserable eyes, dull with pain, that seemed to have sunk in the sockets since he last met them. Her hand was cold, and when he took it lay passive in his hold. Figure and visage were those of one sick with failure, hopeless to despair.

"My precious wife!" His kind heart gave way at sight of her distress. "What has excited you so unreasonably? It is not like you to go into high heroics

on any occasion, much less for no occasion whatsoever. Can it be that after over twenty-one years of married life—ideal in perfectness of trust and happiness—you are allowing a groundless fancy of some mysterious offence on my part, some oversight or inadvertence, or omission—it could be nothing more—to shake your trust in one who has always been true to you in heart, word, and deed—"

A singular change in her countenance arrested his words upon his tongue. Leaning forward, her hands half raised, and motionless, she seemed to question him, dumbly and awfully, features rigid, the nostrils dilated for the respiration that would not come. Had she given him the challenge in fiery words, her meaning would not have been more directly conveyed. As one who has received a blow between the eyes, the husband struck back with the evilest energies of his nature. His eyes glared wolfishly upon her, he started to his feet and threw his hand high in the air:

"What do you mean by that look? By heaven! I will not endure it from you, or any created thing! Only a fool or a devil would offer such an insult to her husband. If a *man* looked at me as you do I'd kill him as he sat!"

She pressed her hands before her face again, crouching together in her chair—he almost believed she cringed under his fierce wrath—and moaning twice, three times—such sighs as sometimes drag the life out with them.

He laid a hand on her shoulder, stooped to her ear, beside himself with the passion of a facile, self-loving nature under a wound to his self-esteem.

"We will make an end of this, Madeline! I am perfectly cool, and conscious of what you have implied and what I am about to say. I swear by my hope of salvation—I call GOD to witness that I have never swerved from my fidelity to you, my lawful wife. I do not know who has been poisoning your mind with doubts, but I stamp each and all of them as infernal lies, more disgraceful to you than to me. Do you hear and understand me?"

Pulling herself up by the elbows of her chair, she arose to her full height, deadly-white, but calmer than he.

"There! that will do!" she said, faintly yet distinctly. "As you say, such scenes are useless and trying to us both. I beg your pardon for exciting you so painfully. The fault was mine in the beginning. I should not have introduced the subject, and lost command of myself. We will try to forget what has passed in the last half-hour."

She moved to pass him, but he detained her.

"That will not do! You must retract your abominable charges."

"I made none, Richard."

"You did worse! Insinuations are cowardly as well as devilish."

"It was a thorough misunderstanding on my part that led me to speak as I did. You are right in one thing. I have never known you, in all the years we spent together, until to-night. Again, I ask you to forgive me for spoiling what has been a very pleasant evening, and promise to be more on my guard for the future," her voice gaining firmness. "It will not do

to risk a repetition of the disagreement. We will never allude to the matter after this. For our children's sake, we must not quarrel. I hope you will not have a headache, to-morrow. I shall feel guilty if you do. I am going upstairs now. Can I do anything for you first?"

Her manner was so natural, so entirely her own, that he stood looking at her, dazed and disarmed. Had he dreamed of the transformation, the storm, the conflict?

"What did you say?" he inquired, stupidly.

She almost smiled.

"I said that it is growing late, and asked if you would like a glass of wine, or ale, or ice-water, before I go upstairs. Or, if there is anything else I can do for your comfort."

"Only this, my darling!" In the reaction of an affectionate heart, he took her in his arms and kissed her again and again. "Forgive me, sweet wife, for my hot, brutal talk. I shall not find it easy to forgive myself for my impatience and rudeness to you, who never before gave me cause for anger."

She received the embrace in chill passivity, looked, moved and spoke, after he released her, like one benumbed by shock or cold.

At the door, she looked back, and put her hand to her head; "I am not very well to-night, Richard, and as the weather is so warm, I will sleep in the south room, I think; good-night!"

"Madeline! the south room!" The repetition escaped him unconsciously. "Let me go to Paul's room, instead, and leave you your own!"

"No, thank you! Paul's chamber is not in order. I shall do very well. It is cooler and quieter for you in your usual quarters."

With another "good-night," she left him.

He hearkened, motionless, to her receding steps through the halls, then the turning of a key in a distant door, before he lighted a cigar and sallied forth for a midnight parade on the asphaltum road leading from house to stables. He walked steadily and not fast, hands behind him and head depressed except that at each end of the long beat he paused to glance up at a corner window in which a yellow gleam struggled with the moonlight for half an hour, then was extinguished.

The windows, about which the honeysuckles had grown so rankly while the family was absent in foreign lands that the tough stems had to be hacked away from the closed shutters before they could be opened, belonged to the "south room." It had been Marion Bayard's, and no one had slept there since she lay dead upon the bed awaiting burial.

CHAPTER XII.

SALOME was the first of the family to appear below stairs on the following morning.

The grass was dewless, the day sultry, even at this hour, and slumbrous with portent of coming rain. A heavy bank of clouds was ranged upon the western horizon. In the careless immunity from atmospheric influences that goes with perfect health and spirits, the girl thought the world was never lovelier ; inhaled the still, warm air as if it were fraught with ozone and cooled by passage over Mt. Blanc. She had business in hand that accounted for her early rising; vases and jars were to be replenished with fresh flowers, and she had it in her heart to cut a basket of choice roses, the summer's generous second growth, to be sent with her love and her mother's to Mrs. Rufus Lee. The larger basket on her left arm, intended for the home-supply, was nearly filled, and a few selected beauties were laid carefully in the smaller, when she saw Rex Lupton striding up the slope by the direct route he had taken last night.

He waved the open convolvulus over his head before he was near enough to speak, and she ran down the walk to meet him.

"The victory is mine, then?" she said, joyfully.

"First riz!" What had come to the man of sedate and polished speech to plunge him into the depths of

the slang he abhorred? "I did all I could to force judgment in my favor, by putting it in a vase and leaving it on the piazza-roof under my window, where the sun would not touch it before noon, but it stayed wide awake all night. I am convinced that it comes of dissipated stock—that it sprang from a bacchanalian root. Look at its complexion! It is absolutely apoplectic!"

"Shame on you! Let me have the darling! She is as lovely as Aurora's self—the apotheosis of a convolvulus — a thrice-glorified morning-and-night glory! I shall mark the vine on which she grew, and save the seed to plant under my window next spring. 'Bacchanalian! apoplectic!' I blush for your vocabulary. See where the light shines through it!"

The trumpet-shaped stem of the opened chalice was tenderest rose color, translucent and ineffably soft and pure; the curving brim was velvety-purple, rayed with a five pointed star of deep carmine. The stately stamen arose from the heart like a cream-tinted altar taper. Enthroned upon the green calyx and straight stalk, Aurora's child looked fearlessly up at the sky.

"It *is* very lovely!" Rex said in a changed tone. "I wish, since it is yours, that I could keep it from fading—like all other beautiful things!"

"Then we must make the best of them while we have them. Happily, nothing can take the memory of beauty from us. *That* is immortal. We can always recollect how our Aurora looks at this minute."

To native sunniness of temperament she joined courage that never faltered. She willed to be happy,

and that those she loved and liked should walk in the light with her. The more sombre nature of the man who sauntered through the rose thickets and alleys with her, as she continued the task of choosing and clipping buds and blossoms, basked and expanded with the mere contiguity. When the work was done, they paused for last words upon the piazza steps.

"The honeysuckles bloom here from May to November!" said Salome, reaching up her gardening scissors to sever a spray bending down to touch her head. "The scent is inseparably connected in my mind with this place and porch. Who is it that calls the *associativeness* of odors 'the memory of the imagination'?"

"I do not know," abruptly. "So you cannot say positively whether or not you will ride with me this afternoon?"

"Not until I consult mamma. I shall enjoy it dearly, and I know of nothing to prevent it. But I always refer such questions to her. If you hear nothing to the contrary, you may call for me at four o'clock. I thought this was to be a busier day than yesterday?" saucily glancing up from the branch she was trimming, and startled by the earnestness of his gaze.

"Give me a piece of that and put it yourself into my button-hole to console me for losing my wager on the morning-glory—won't you?" he said, as abruptly as he had spoken a while before.

Something in accent or look—the words were nothing—brought the blood to her cheeks and stilled her vivacious tongue. Silently she cut a cluster of

the odorous tubes, and as mutely, with down-drooping lids—pinned them on his lappel. As he stood on the step below, their faces were almost on a level. He *made* her lift the drooping lashes by the unspoken force of will; gazed fixedly and far into her eyes, conscious and shy for the first time in all their lives; then bowed low, with uncovered head, and was gone.

Not a syllable was uttered by either of them after he asked for the honeysuckle—not so much as "thank you" and "good-morning."

Salome's flowers were disposed in vase and jar and bowl; those intended for the parsonage on damp moss in a shallow basket, and screened by tissue-paper ready to be sent before her father descended to breakfast. Her cheeks were still pink, her eyes neither so merry nor quick as usual, when her mother called to her from the dining-room some minutes later.

"Salome, love! have you seen papa this morning?"

"He is here, mamma! I am just adorning him with his *boutonnière*."

The family custom was to meet, exchange kisses, and receive Salome's morning bouquets on the porch. It was a slight surprise when her mother called again:

"Will you come in to breakfast—both of you?"

The apartment was shaded—rather too much darkened for eyes just brought in from the outer light. Salome laughed as she feigned to grope her way to her mother's chair, and to fumble for the place on which the rosebud she had brought was to be set.

"Luck and love—not sight—guided me to your lips," she added, after kissing her.

"You will get accustomed to the half-light, presently. My head aches, and I have a troublesome pain in my eyes. We feel this first American summer more than I had expected. Our Swiss and Norway seasons have spoiled us for the dry continuous heat."

Richard stooped to kiss his wife more gently and affectionately than was his custom, if that were possible. While she spoke, he passed his fingers lightly across her forehead.

"I hoped I had a monopoly of headaches. We cannot have you fall into so evil a habit at this late day. One offender in the house is enough."

"If I ever marry," remarked Salome, as the business of the meal began with the basket of summer fruit, "I hope my liege lord will take example by my father. But I have a presage that he will not be half so fond of me, nor one-quarter so true and gallant, so unremitting in *les petits soins*—such as paring fruit for my eating—after twenty odd years of wedded bliss, as you are with mamma. It is the prettiest thing I ever saw—the daily life of you two."

"Perhaps you will not be such a nonpareil as a wife as mamma," returned her father. "I doubt if one century can produce two."

"James, I will ring when I need you!" Mrs. Phelps said to the butler, a sharp ring in her sudden address. Her forehead was knotted, her manner indicative of irritation as she continued to the two left with her in the room: "I made a discovery this morning that annoyed me extremely. I slept in the south room, Salome, not feeling so well as usual. On throwing open the blinds when I arose, my eyes

caught a flash of light from Mrs. Fitchett's second-story window. It was the reflection of a spy-glass, and she was holding it, surveying our premises as deliberately as she might an enemy's camp. Of course, I drew back from the window, and did not go near it again. But, half an hour afterward, when I was quite dressed, I espied from the front window her daughter creeping stealthily into our lower gate, which is, you know, not visible from this floor. She made directly for that Norway fir at the left of the drive, and seemed to pick something from the other side of it, then ran away with her prize, whatever it might be, never stopping to look behind her until she reached home. The whole proceeding was extraordinary, and, to me, unaccountable. I do not relish such exhibitions of neighborly interest."

Her husband heard her with a countenance kindling into fun. His sense of the ridiculous was keen. The incident had but one side to him, and that was the comic.

"Her Majesty is irate!" he affected to communicate to Salome. "We so seldom see her nettled that we may forgive neighbor Fitchett for granting us a new sensation. Yes, my love!" raising his voice and assuming a ferocious frown—"the opera-glass was bad enough, but the theft of the fir-apples was unpardonable in the daughter of a woman who tells me she has the 'finest *veracity* of ch'ice fruits in all the State o' *Mass*'choositts.' We must fence in that tree with barbed wire, and chain a dog at the lower gate."

"Seriously, papa, I think it very disagreeable to

have one's grounds raked by a scandal-loving woman at all hours of the day!" Salome answered, with heightened complexion. "It is ill-natured, as well as ill-bred."

She was recalling the promenade among the rose-thickets, and, yet more vividly, the scene on the porch-steps.

"It makes one feel as if we lived in a glass-house. I am not surprised at mamma's indignation."

Richard's merry indifference was imperturbable.

"If we did live within glass walls, my dear, we should have less to dread. The trouble is not lest my buxom townswoman should report what she sees, but what she does *not*. Fortunately, her talents in that line are so notorious that she cannot harm us if she would, and I flatter myself that her good-will toward me as an old acquaintance—who admires her grapery and water-wheel, and listens patiently to the story of the bills, just and unjust, sent in for her house and 'improvements'—will not let her say anything unkind of us. Almiry is loud and vulgar and officious, and impertinent and curious, with a dozen or more other trifling drawbacks to polish of manner and general agreeableness, but she has a good heart, and is really a sincere friend of mine. She would cut off her hand—rings and all—rather than wound or injure me. I make it a rule to keep on excellent terms with people whose lands adjoin mine."

Salome spoke hastily, stealing a look at her mother's grave face and lowered eyes. It made her nervous and a little ashamed when her father expressed his opinion of himself so naïvely.

"Nevertheless, papa, no one with the barest instincts of a gentlewoman would descend to the spy-glass, and she is the 'leading lady' in Mr. Lee's church! That is what one of his parishioners called her the other day in my hearing. Heaven help those who are led!"

"Amen!" responded Richard, cordially. "Madeline, dear, we must return the Lees' call very soon, and do all we can to mitigate the hardships of their lot. I should like, if convenient to you, to have them and Hollis, with, perhaps, Mrs. Lupton, to dinner soon after I return from Boston."

"Whenever you like. Salome and I will call within a day or two."

She struck the bell for James, and the talk rolled away from personalities. Salome and her father sustained the burden of it. Mrs. Phelps was colorless and quiet, eating little, and seldom volunteering a remark. When they left the table, she went directly to the conference with cook and butler which generally succeeded a half-hour spent with her husband on the piazza, while he enjoyed the cigar Freehold principles banished from his office. As he smoked, it was her custom to read aloud such items of daily news as she knew would interest him, and to join in his comments upon them. Salome seated herself near him this morning, but neither touched the paper lying on the stand hard by.

Mrs. Lupton would have seen, by daylight, that the girl's chair commanded a section of the outer world framed in the rift in the vines through which she and the moon had regarded one another the

night before. The astute widow would likewise have discovered, without asking questions or seeming to take notes, that the outlook took in the Lupton gateway, and the upper part of the cross-street terminating at the Lupton grounds. She would undoubtedly, moreover, have shifted her position in a perfectly natural and unpremeditated manner, and seen everybody who crossed the field of observation. Fidelia Fitchett, smartly dressed, went by to school with a bevy of comrades, her sky-blue parasol and grass-green grenadine gown giving her the look of a biped butterfly ; then a baby-carriage, propelled by a nurse-maid, and the buggy of a bulky burgher on his way to business ; Gerald Lupton, on his pony, returning from a morning gallop, taking off his cap airily to his tall brother who passed out of the gate as he entered it ; Hollis Lee, whose matutinal walk always led him past the Phelps place—

"My daughter!"

The girl started as her father addressed her in a low, impressive tone. He had awaited the appearance of his reader, drawing upon his cigar in a leisurely way, while the mass of horizon clouds mounted slowly toward the sun, and the morning freshness—what there was of it—died utterly. Salome imagined that he was pondering business matters, easing her conscience for her wordless reverie by supposing that interruption of his would be an intrusion.

"Yes, papa!" withdrawing her eyes from her lookout, and observing his serious, almost anxious face.

"I go to Boston at six o'clock this afternoon. If the business that calls me there were less important, I would not leave your mother just now. I am not satisfied as to the state of her health. Something—the hot weather, or possibly a slight malarial tendency—a malign influence of some kind—is telling upon her. I have never seen her spirits so variable before as during the past few days. You heard her say that she was not well last night. I found her almost hysterical from the indulgence of morbid fancies when I got home. This morning, her head aches—also an unusual thing with her. Should the shower we are likely to have unless the wind gets under that cloud, cool the air, I will coax her to drive with me for an hour after lunch, and try to cheer her up. While I am away, I trust you to watch over her. She enjoys no other society as she does yours—"

"Except yours, papa!"

He went on without heeding the amendment: "I owe so much more to her than most men to their wives—comfort, healing, life itself—she has been so loyal, so brave, patient, and loving—that I tremble at every shadow of evil that may threaten her. Ah! my darling!" rising to meet his wife, as she emerged from the hall door—"I was afraid your head was worse. The heat is terrific, but we will have rain by-and-by. I must hurry off, now. The shower will take the oppressiveness out of the air, and break the drought, I hope. We all feel the depressing influence of the murky weather. Should the afternoon be fine, I shall make time to give you a drive. These pale cheeks"—his arm was about her, and he drew

her toward the upper end of the porch. Salome might easily be mistaken in what she thought was the import of the lowly-uttered conclusion of the sentence. Why should the leal lover, whom the admiring daughter would have her ideal husband resemble, add—"are a silent reproach to me?"

Why, also, except that she was unused to the headache that hung about her this sultry morning, should the smile with which her mother received her father's parting kiss be as sickly as the fast fading sunlight? The two never disagreed openly. The one was too sweet-tempered in the main, too tender of heart, even when ruffled, too manly and too just, to lose the sense of what was due to the woman who honored his name, while bearing it. The other—

"There was never another like you, mamma!" cried the girl, at this point of her meditations, folding her suddenly in her arms, and laying the rosy cheek against the pale one. "I don't wonder papa worships you! He was talking to me, as you joined us, of how much he is your debtor—how much dearer you are to him as time goes on."

"Are you in the conspiracy to flatter me out of my wits?" returning the embrace. Her lips were chill and unpliant; there was no resonance in her tone, and she subjoined, hurriedly. "The wind is rising! It will bring the shower upon us before we are ready for it! There is a flash of lightning! It is said that September thunderstorms are peculiarly destructive, and morning electricity more deadly than that which comes later in the day. Run upstairs, dear, and see that the shutters are fast and the sashes

closed on the windward side of the house. Don't come down again, but go at once to your studies!"

Without demur, the child obeyed. Her mother's manner was unnatural, but she meant what she said. Had she bidden her walk into the outer air, charged with storm, bareheaded, and march up and down the terrace until the rain was over, she would have gone as readily and unquestioningly.

Mrs. Phelps remained on the piazza while the clouds broke in fire and flood. Withdrawn into the latticed corner, once appropriated to Rex and Marion, she sat just beyond the wash of the rain, lashed into spray, that flew along the floor almost to her feet. The heavens stooped between her and the nearest spires, the darkness swallowed her up except when the lightnings showed her face, pallid in the blue blaze like a sad ghost against the dense background of vines. She did not move or speak for gloom or glare; her eyes stared into the fierce heart of the tempest; her fingers were knotted upon one another as though strangling something caught between the palms. Physical pain was so rare with her that it told severely upon spirits and mien. Yet so brave a woman would, it might be thought, be less easily daunted by a foreign foe.

She was lying down when Richard came home to the early dinner ordered on account of his journey. Entering her room with soundless tread, he stood by the lounge before she was aware of his presence. Her eyes were closed, but the hard fold between the brows, the droop of the lines in the lower part of the face, the clutch of the fingers of the right hand upon

a plait of her gown, told that she was not asleep, and that the suffering had not been succeeded by prostration. She gave a violent start, and uttered a faint cry at the sound of his voice, then trembled, as in an ague.

He knelt by her and pillowed her head upon his heart.

"My dearest love! don't you think you have punished yourself sufficiently for my cruel, unmanly behavior of last night? Can't you forget, as well as forgive? We have lived and loved together too long to cherish wounded feelings—don't you think so? Teach me how to bring back the smiles to your lips, sweet one. I cannot live without them!"

"My head aches intensely!" she said, her lips quivering, and whitening. "Don't think there is any other cause for anxiety. I shall be better, now that the weather is changing. Let me get up! I did not know it was so late."

Withstanding her movement to rise, he rearranged and cooled her pillows, bathed her temples and wrists with the delicate deftness of a practised nurse, and begged her to "try to sleep for his sake" until he should come up again.

So speedily that he must have hurried his dinner to expedite his return, he brought up a tray on which was a Sèvres tea-equipage, a silver rack of toast, a broiled woodcock, and a cluster of luscious grapes. With the playful tenderness that became him better than any other mood, he poured out the tea, carved the bird, and fed her with it, chatting in low restful tones, and forbidding her to reply.

"Salome and I had a pitched battle over this tray," he declared. "It has been so long since either of us had a chance to minister to you as an invalid, that we were emulous of the privilege. I believe she would rob me of our drive, if she could. Now, my blessing! the color is coming back to your lips, and your eyes are less languid. I made up my mind when I saw you this noon that I would not leave you for any business trip, however urgent."

"But you will!" with rallying animation. "You see how much better I am. The tea has quite relieved the pain in my head. The drive will complete the cure."

With a touch of habitual energy, she made ready for the jaunt, Salome being graciously permitted by her "rival" to assist at her mother's toilette, while he went below stairs to smoke a post-prandial cigar.

"Mr. Lupton has invited me to ride with him at four o'clock," the girl said, imitating her father's soothing accents and quiet action. There was balm for the raw nerves in each intonation, magic in the sweep of the soft fingers through the unbound hair, the lulling touches that fastened the tresses into place. "I have not given him a definite reply because I could not bear to leave you if you were to remain at home. Have you the least objection to my going?"

"None, my love. I am glad Rex can give himself the little recreation. He is a safe, elder-brotherly attendant. "Say 'good-by' to papa before we go, as you will not see him again. His train leaves at six. The rain has laid the dust. The roads will be in fine order."

So composed was her demeanor, so natural her complexion and smile, that the daughter went gayly down to see her off. Richard put his wife into the low-hung phaeton, built expressly for her use under his supervision. The exceeding tenderness of touch, look, and voice were blent with something that was pleading or deprecatory. He might only now have arrived at a just appreciation of her value, and found it impossible to tolerate his previous blindness.

Through an iridescent tear-mist Salome saw them disappear in the elm-shaded street leading to the lower town, but there was neither consciousness nor prevision of evil in her mind. Nor did she question herself as to the cause of the readiness of sympathy with the wedded lovers which brought the sun-mists to heart and eyes, the strange sweet aching that made her lay her hand on her chest, as she repeated aloud :

"How they love one another!"

Richard Phelps was a brilliant talker when he chose to exert himself. He took as much pains, to-day, to adapt themes and treatment to his companion's taste as would the wiliest courtier in the hearing of royalty. He had an encouraging auditor. Quite restored to herself, Mrs. Phelps led him on to his best, and the knowledge of success which is the speaker's surest inspiration. All Freehold was abroad in the delicious weather ; the wet roads, shining with sinking pools of fragrant rain, were populous with pleasure-seekers.

"Sensible in them!" observed Richard—"but too

much like a Derby day to suit a man who wants to have a *tête-à-tête* with the woman of his heart, and this continual crook of the elbow hat-brimward is a bore. We will try this new road. My townspeople have civic ambitions. They have graded, straightened, ironed out and criss-crossed the dear old irregular country highways with embryo boulevards, but I think I can find my way to a lovely nook the children and I *dropped* down upon one day. Salome recollected it, but Paul did not. Both cried out at once that 'Mamma must see it!' As I told you this noon, Salome contends with me for the honor of serving you, and if I ever have occasion to call a fellow out for making love to my wife it will be my own son. Will you hold the reins one moment, please?"

He leaped over the wheel, and climbed a steep bank at the top of which grew a sweetbrier rose-tree, yellow and mossy and straggling, but lifting aloft on the uppermost spray, as if to keep it beyond the reach of meddling hands, a tuft of scented leaves, a single perfect flower and three or four buds. Mrs. Phelps was especially fond of this hardy, delicate wildling of our waysides, and her husband never forgot one of her preferences. He was scrambling down the bank when the Fitchett landau, all varnish and silver plating, whirled around a bend in the road. The widow and Mrs. Tom Johnston were on the back seat, Fidelia on the front.

"Hole up, Charley!" called the pebbly tones of the relict. "*Good* day, Mrs. Phelps! How d'do, Richard! F' th' land's sake, what be you goin' to do with th' briers?"

Richard bowed and laughed.

"They are for my wife. The sweetbrier is her favorite rose."

"I want t' know! 'T's kind o' queer, too, that a lady with nigh 'pon a half-acre o' *expensious* roses, sh'd resk you breakin' your neck fo' a bramble-bush. I only hope *she* won't throw 'em away before she gits home! That's th' latest fashion, I'm tole! Go on, Charley! Good-by t' you both!"

"What does she mean?" queried Mrs. Phelps, looking after the gorgeous equipage.

"Some malodorous crumb of gossip, you may be sure!" Richard climbed back into his seat. "Nothing that concerns us or ours, thank heaven! The impertinent familiarity of her class is irresistibly funny to one who can afford to laugh at it. That woman learned her letters from the same nice, elderly spinster who taught me mine, and at the same time. She was never within my father's doors. I doubt if my mother or sisters knew her by sight. But she establishes a social equilibrium by calling me "Richard." Whether she pulls herself up, or drags me down, is not for me to say."

"She inspires me with curious aversion," pursued Mrs. Phelps, thoughtfully. "I should say that she is not only disagreeable, but dangerous. Were I in Mr. Lee's place, I would rather she was out of the church than in it. I would not care for the loyalty of a parish that can be shaken by the defection of such a woman."

"It is bread-and-butter, my love! In this case, it is gilded gingerbread and gilt-edged butter. She is

the richest woman in Freehold. Were she to leave the 'Old North Hill,' the ways of that Zion would—*à la* Mantalini—'weep and howl most demnibly.'"

"The adverb suits the case!" with a slightly bitter smile.

Now and then she had the manner of one who draws away from a dangerous verge, and forces herself to think of other people and things.

"Richard!"

"Well, my pet?"

"Would you object to taking a pew in Mr. Lee's church?"

"I object to nothing you propose, sweet wife. I have thought of the same thing myself. Lee is an able man and a better preacher than our nominal pastor whom we hardly know as yet. And it would please Hollis."

"It might give support where support is needed. The sweet, tired face of that little pastoress haunts me," Mrs. Phelps continued, still musingly; "I long to help her in some way. Her position is one of servile, ignoble bondage. There ought to be a special training-school for the wives of ministers who are to settle in such places and churches as one finds hereabout—a curriculum prescribed that should make them mindful of 'church and society.' Education in young ladies' seminaries should be conducted with wise regard to ecclesiastical isothermal lines."

Richard looked intensely amused. Her sallies always delighted him.

"You are hard on my congeners, little woman!

Remember that your husband is a member—born and bred—of the Society, if not of the Church—"

His laugh ceased suddenly. They had swept sharply around an angle of the wooded highway into a cross-road, plunging downward into a hemlock wood.

Mrs. Phelps started forward convulsively, and laid her hand on the reins.

"*Where* are you taking me?"

"My love! what is it? The hill is steep, but perfectly safe. Can't you trust my driving? There! we are over the pitch. This—" checking the horse—"is what the children and I wanted you to see."

They had come, by one of the newly-cut roads, into the "oratory" she had promised Marion Bayard should be forever sacred to memories of her. The arched opening in the hemlocks had been artificially enlarged, so that a broader expanse of hill, meadow, river and town was included in the dark-green frame. Instead of cloudy battlements, such as she and Marion had beheld at their last visit to the spot, the western sky was perfectly clear and of a subdued topaz-yellow, melting into the sapphire of the zenith.

Richard put a gentle hand on his wife's which still trembled.

"Hush! listen! they will begin again in a minute!" he whispered.

A sudden passion of color rolled up from the west, —a rush of crimson, rose and pink, effacing the yellow, and flushing the tranquil river, as if a great rain of peach-blooms had fallen there. The red-brown boles of the hemlocks started into relief against the

shadowed heart of the grove ; the outermost branches shook gleaming fingers across the road. As if awakened by the pulse of light, a thrush called timidly and tentatively to his mate, who answered reassuringly. Another and another took heart of song until the dim recesses of the wood thrilled and throbbed with plaintive music.

"The thrush is the winged Memnon of our woods," breathed Richard softly. "There is something mysterious in his salute to the rising and setting sun."

His wife threw off the loving hand that lingered on hers, tore at her throat to loosen the iron talons that forced blood-red blindness before her sight—the face but just now pallid as with the touch of death, had a vivid flush that was not the sunset's.

"My God!" she gasped, "I cannot bear it! I cannot! no! no!" thrusting away the embrace that would comfort her—"Not a word! Only drive on! get me away from this!"

Richard complied without protest. Chagrined and perplexed, he yet recognized that the emotion which hurried his wife on to frenzy was ungovernable. Enigmatical it might ever remain to him, but it was fearfully real to her. He could not, in his ignorance, sympathize. He would not question. Other—perhaps most women were hysterically irrational at times. It was not Madeline's way.

They were in the lower road, in sight of the station, —when she spoke again :

"I shall be well and sensible when you come home. I have tried you sadly to-day. I beg your pardon."

Resentment, with Richard, never outlived the first

penitent breath from the offender. His temper was like gun-cotton. The explosion left no mark, provided always that the self-love fostered by years of prosperity and petting was not abraded.

The warm, blue eyes softened instantly into fondness, now; the face bent upon her was pure pity and love.

"'Pardon' and love like mine are not to be named in the same breath, sweet wife! You have not offended me. You are not to blame for a highly-excited state of nerves which my clumsy efforts at soothing have but increased. Whatever you might do—" this with growing earnestness—"were you to break my heart or —if it were possible to imagine such a thing—to sully my honor, I should forgive you, whether you asked me to do it, or not; would live with and for you as long as you would let me.

"But a truce to heroics! Here is the station, and there comes Hollis to drive you home. I was not willing to trust the reins, with Sindbad at the other end of them, to these shaky little hands to-day, so told him to meet us here. Good-by, my precious one! God bless and keep you safely for me! Let me have a line to-morrow to tell me how you are; I shall write every day, of course."

Hollis Lee's perceptions were fine. A glance at the lady's countenance told him that the tone of her spirits was less firm than usual. He said little, and covered the taciturnity of both by feigned preoccupation in the task of threading their way in and out of the string of vehicles about the station and in the business streets. He hoped, in his unworld-worn singleness

of heart, that, should he ever win the woman he loved, she would feel a separation for a few days as her mother did after twenty years of wedded happiness.

In the avenue leading by the Fitchett and Phelps places, they met the rich widow's carriage. She had set Mrs. Tom Johnston down at her own door, and was discoursing cluckingly to her daughter.

"Screeching like a superannuated blue-jay!" Hollis reported to his sister-in-law. "She sets my teeth on edge, and I think I have the same effect on her. She nodded at me as a rickety poker might, if afraid of losing its head, and her grimace was a snarl."

He sprang whistling up the stairs. He had no excuse for calling upon Salome this evening, but had not her parents set the stamp of approval upon her innocent admission that he was "quite one of the family," by choosing him as her mother's charioteer in the sight of all the town? Moreover, Mr. Phelps had left office and business entirely in his hands for a week—possibly longer.

Ethel had selected five glorious Jacqueminot roses, each the mate of that worn by Salome, over night, from the basket sent to her that morning, and put them in her prettiest vase, to grace his study-table. The boy stood looking down into their royal hearts, a glow with purple flame, until his eyes were dim—then raised them to his lips.

"I think heaven must be made up of such spirits as my sweet sister, and that mother and daughter!" he said, reverently.

CHAPTER XIII.

"WHAT a *busy* look a field of Indian corn has!"

Salome Phelps reined in her horse at a wayside field to say it.

It was the largest maize-field for miles around. The serried lances, glossy and gleaming after the rain, stretched over the comb of the hill, like an armed host in close line of battle.

"The tossing blades and saucy tassels, the staunch stalks, the general *pointedness* and alertness of the massed rows, remind us that it is indigenous to America," continued the girl. "It is native—through and through! You know that Mr. Jefferson designed a sheaf of maize as the capital of a shaft that should be the beginning of a national school of architecture. It was never adopted—more's the pity! Papa has a fine cut of it. It makes one angry, as he looks at it, to think how we persist in anachronizing the homes of the New World by Ionic pillars and Corinthian capitals. Ah, well! Everything comes right in time. We must wait a century or two."

She shook her bridle, and they cantered up the slope. Close against the fence of the great corn-field grew what Salome called "a misplaced section of the Adirondacks"—a wide belt of magnificent pines, shooting up forty or fifty feet straight heavenward

before sending out a bough, then broadening, like umbrella-palms, into canopies of verdure. Nothing grew beneath them; the equestrians rode freely through the long aisles; the horses' hoofs were muffled by the springy bed of fallen needles and cones. The boughs talked together far overhead, as the sea breaks hoarsely on the sands; the place had the calm awfulness of a cathedral—the dimness, the fragrance, and the peace for body and spirit.

Again the riders drew rein by tacit consent and hearkened with bowed head to the soughing branches.

"We need but the arbutus underfoot," said Salome, drawing a long, deep breath.

"I need *nothing!*" The young man was very pale, but his eyes glowed; the uprising of a long-sealed torrent was in his voice. "Nothing—while you are here, or with me anywhere. When you are not, I need everything that makes life worth living. This is rank presumption in me! You cannot feel it more strongly than I. It came over me just now, when you spoke of national architecture and Jefferson's design—when, in one sentence, you painted the maize-field—how much you know, and what use you make of your knowledge—how high your thought is, how graceful your speech, and what an ignorant hulk I am—"

"Dear friend! you shall not depreciate yourself so cruelly in my presence! You, whose life is one long deed of heroism! Others talk—you *do!*"

The girl's cheeks were flickering flames; her speech was low and hurried; involuntarily she stretched her hand toward him. It was seized and held.

"Child!" huskily. "Do not lift me up to heaven to cast me down to hell!"

She tried to laugh up into his agitated visage; her hand stirred in his grasp.

"Fie! what a naughty word!"

But at what she read in his burning gaze, her head drooped until the hat-brim hid all but the lips through which the breath went pantingly, and the rounded, trembling chin. For a brief interval there was silence between them, overflowed by the surge of the pines.

"Salome!" in a low voice, freighted with feeling.

"Yes—*Rex*," her tone lower than his.

"Am I too old for you?"

She shook her head, an arch dimple in the cheek next to him visible under her hat.

"Too grave? too *blasé?* too commonplace? I am not young, or gifted, or handsome, dear, and, up to the May-day of our meeting, my life had more shadow than sunlight in it. But I love you as fervently and purely as ever man loved woman. If you will accept the poor gift, all that I am, all that I may make of myself in the new day that would dawn with the hope of winning your love—shall be yours, unreservedly and forever. Will you take it?"

"Yes—Rex!"

The high-road from which they had diverged was less than fifty yards distant, sunken by some feet below the level of the pine-grove, and the embankment on that side closely fringed with golden-rod and asters. The screen was impervious save at one point—a gap a few feet wide, through which the water from the higher ground escaped to the roadside ditch.

By one of the coincidences too frequent and consistently perverse to be reckoned as accidents, a lady and a boy in a village-cart were passing the wood at the moment the second affirmative faltered from the girl's lips. The lad who drove was observant of his horse, a skittish pony, his mother of everything in general and nothing in particular, until a tableau, far enough removed to give it the effect of an impressionist picture, was revealed by the depression aforesaid.

In a quarter of a twinkling she had thrown the pony almost back on his haunches, was on her feet, and shaking her skirts energetically.

"Gerald! I have dropped my glove! One of a new pair, too! I pulled it off when you got out to gather the fringed gentian, so it cannot be very far back. Jump out and look for it, dear!"

The boy obeyed with alacrity. He thought his mother "a first-rate lot," and was ready to please her when, by so doing, he ran no chance of displeasing himself. She was still standing in the vehicle, and he some yards away, when she called after him in merry apology:

"Here, my darling! There it is—right between the wheels! It is too bad to give you so much trouble, even for my best Paris glove—for which I sent all the way to New York. I shan't forget how willing you were to hunt for it."

So still was the country road that the lovers might have heard her voice, and probably recognized it, but for the ceaseless murmur in the tree-tops and the tumult of the hurrying heart-beats. As it was, they rode on, presently, ignorant and ecstatic, in a serenity

of transport that lent acuteness to eye and ear, and stilled the tongue for a time. Of what use were words to express the glory that had fallen upon the world for them?

The way grew more sequestered, winding into dingles where the slanting sunbeams produced weird and witching transformations of the commonest forms of lowly things, glancing from fallen wet leaves and decaying boughs, and lighting up gorgeous fungi, disks of lake and ochre that encircled dead stumps and thrust up bold, round heads from beds of emerald mosses. Raindrops frosted the bowing, bearded grasses, glittered and twinkled from lanceolate sedges. On the extremest tip of a wild-rose streamer, a quivering, scintillating *blue* diamond swung and broke, while they exclaimed upon it.

Was there ever such another afternoon and ride? Out of the woods into ways that wound leisurely between farm-fences and avenues man's hand had spared but not planted—where dogwood trees, stiff and sturdy, were studded with green, white and black berries, and maple-boughs kindled into premature blaze, as if ignited by chance sparks dropped from the torch which autumn would, in another month, apply to the whole forest. Fern-beds with delicate *lacey* foliations, and countless tossing, serrated fronds, lined the fences; golden-rod edged the streams with closely-woven chains of barbaric splendor. The world was an open missal bound and illuminated with green-and-gold, and set with all manner of precious jewels.

Red-stemmed Virginia creepers, profligate of useless fruit—small beryl spheres, also scarlet-stemmed

—ramped over fence and stony field, and clambered aloft to strangle despondent cedars. A deserted farm-cottage, with gambrel roof, stood at the intersection of the highway with a grass-grown lane. Lilac trees, the leaves gray with must, grew up to the eaves, hiding all the front windows. Their roots had heaved the flat door-step; suckers shot up athwart the threshold where little children used to play, and old people bask in the low sun that now fell blankly on warping panels and rusted latch. The palings were gone from the garden at the back in which coarse, vulgar weeds, that would reach a tall man's chin, ran to seed. One tiger-lily, dauntless in desertion and defiant of decay, pushed a head of tawny fire out of tangled rankness, to stare and nod at the sun.

Moving, thinking and speaking—when he did speak—like a man in a rapturous dream, Rex alighted, gathered the audacious beauty, and gave it to Salome, who pinned it on the lappel of her habit.

Past and future were not to either of them. Through all the time they had known, it seemed to have been ordained that they should ride thus, side by side, much of the way with linked hands, always indissolubly one in heart, in a blissful eternal Now, through the New Jerusalem of love where death was changed to beauty, brightness into glory unspeakable.

It was half an hour after sunsetting, when they made their last halt on the brow of a long-backed eminence overlooking the town. A broad, low arc of shadow lay above the horizon line, the slowly-mounting penumbra of the earth, as the sun sank below the uppermost curve of the globe. A pale, blue-gray

shadow, that would presently enfold a hemisphere in night. Higher than this lay a curved band of ash-rose, fading above into twilight mistiness. Below, the hills lowered their crests and stretched themselves out to sleep. On the edge of the rose-flushed band hung a single white planet, large and tremulous with the vibrant twinkle of a lamp that still swings from the touch of the hand that lighted it.

"Dear, beautiful world!" was Salome's happy sigh. "Don't you love it with all its scars and faults?"

"*Now?* yes!"

The avenues of the upper town were deep with twilight shade and hush; the smell of the rain lingered lovingly in the air; soft darkness that might be felt, and was a benediction to over-taxed nerves, brooded under the elms. They entered the homestead grounds from a back street, and alighted at the stables, leaving the horses in the care of the waiting groom.

In nearing the house they heard the piano, and a voice crooning a hymn. The only light in the front of the mansion was in the hall. Door and windows were open, and, pausing in the vine shadows, they could discern the outline of the white figure at the instrument. Rex passed his arm about his betrothed, and drew her to him, the hearts of both throbbing hard and painfully with the instant flight of memory to another night when they had listened in the same place to the same voice.

It was no fond improvisation now, no grateful outpouring of the wifely "love that loves alway." Unconscious of any audience beside that of the ear ever

bowed to the cry of pain, she sang quaint old words to an air yet more quaint and old, both learned in childhood from her Southern mother :

"Thy promise is my only plea,
With this I venture nigh ;
Thou callest burdened souls to Thee,
And such, O Lord ! am I.
Remember me! remember me!
Dear Lord! remember me!
Remember all Thy dying groans,
And *then*—remember *me!*"

And, again, with fingers that just touched the keys, and tones that just reached the listeners without, in what was rather a sob than a song, the two last lines, over and over :

"Thou callest burdened souls to Thee—
And such, O Lord! *am I!*"

The lovers drew back into the denser shade of the embowered piazza, clinging together with a strange prescience of impending sorrow overcasting the divine calm of their newly-found joy. Rex tightened the embrace about the lithe waist until the dear head rested on his breast. At the shudder that ran over him, Salome looked up—her own frank, fearless gesture ;—he could see through the gloom the shine of her brave eyes.

"Nothing *can* go very far wrong with us now!" she whispered.

With the kiss, which was his only reply, warm on her mouth, she put her hand within his arm and walked with him through the French window into her mother's presence.

"Mamma, dear!" a light, fluttering laugh, musical as a robin's call, betraying the nervousness mingled with her happiness. "Don't scold us for staying out late. Something happened."

"My love! an accident? Were you hurt?"

"It was not an accident!" said Rex, joining in the laugh the agitated girl could not repress. "If you will allow me, I will tell you all about it, while Salome changes her habit."

The daughter escaped while he spoke. The light from the hall-lamp struck full upon the mother's figure, erect, motionless, statuesque, in her colorless draperies—her countenance eloquent of what looked to the conscious suitor like stern surprise. He would not have been mortal had not his first sensation, when left alone with her, been one of disagreeable embarrassment, recollecting, as she must, also, that he had once before approached her on a like delicate errand. His second was intensest self-scorn that a boyish experience should have power to detract from the proud fruition of the man's desireful hope.

He made an impetuous step forward that brought him within the illuminated area about her,—held out his hand with a smile that warmed and colored his face into beauty:

"You have known me for eight years, *motherlie!* Can you trust me to try to make your daughter happy? I think you know that I will do my best."

She wavered backward, and caught the piano to steady herself.

"Rex! *Salome!* Do you mean it?"

Then with passionate emphasis for which he was not prepared,—

"How much love—what *kind* of love can you give a child with her depth of heart, her capacity for affection? I never dreamed of this! Where were my eyes? where was my maternal instinct? I have been blind, selfish,—unmotherly! My *little* daughter! My baby!"

She covered her eyes with her hand and moaned, sinking upon the music-stool as if strength and courage had deserted her.

Rex bent one knee to the floor, and raised the fingers she still held to his lips.

"Dear Mrs. Phelps! my almost mother! will you listen to me? Neither of us feigns forgetfulness of my early dream. It is no dishonor to the memory of the dead to say that my love for your child goes far deeper than did the passion of the boy. There is not a fibre of my heart and soul that this has not fastened upon. You knew how I loved her whom we have both mourned so long and sincerely. I only ask that you will let all of my life to come testify to my devotion to her whom I seek to make my wife. Again, let me remind you how long you have known me, and how much less I have always said than I felt. Never before have I felt my miserable incommunicableness to be such an agony as at this moment, when I cannot summon words that might convince you of what your peerless daughter is to me!"

To his unutterable amazement, for he felt how poor were his pleadings, how slow and difficult his speech, she leaned forward, put a hand on his head and kissed

him between the eyes. A solemn, loving kiss that was a chrism.

"May Our Father bless you both!" she said, simply. "It is true that in my selfish absorption in other things, I never thought of what has happened to you. That Salome liked and honored you, I knew, and that you sought her society—I fancied as you might that of a young sister. You must allow me time to readjust my ideas"—smiling affectionately into his radiant face, as he arose and stood before her. "You have had your own place in my heart for many years, but I had not hoped to set you there beside my children—my Paul and my Salome!"

A peal at the door-bell made them fall apart. At the visitor's entrance, Rex stood at a window looking down upon the twinkling lights of the town; Mrs. Phelps had turned to the piano and was dropping noiseless fingers on the keys.

"I hed oughter apologize for interception of a teeter-teeter!" said Mrs. Fitchett, in blustering that sounded like impertinence. "But the fac' is, I come on special business. 'N' sez I to F'delia—'Th' straight-forrard course is allers th' safest to ensue 'n mos' Christyan,' sez I. 'I don' know, sez I t' Mrs. Tom Johnston, 'whatever Mrs. Phelps'll think o' me comin' in, so unpermediated like, considerin' she's *that* ruleable that it's more'n likely she stan's on her dignity 'bout returnin' 'n' countin' visits 'n' so-forth. But when sech a serious p'int 's this is concerned,' sez I,—Don't go, Rex!" He was disappearing through the casement. "I'd liefer you'd hear what I've got to say 'n' not. I'm quite aware that I'm a-trespassin'

on your lesshure 'n' other concerns, comin' in so untimeously, 's one might say."

"Will you not be seated, Mrs. Fitchett?" asked the hostess, setting forward a chair.

"Well! I don' know 's it's worth while!" taking it notwithstanding. "Ez I were sayin', I'm a' honest, unassoomin' lady-member of a' Orthodox church, one as reads her Bible, 'n' don' hold with Frenchified notions of morality, 'n' fam'ly flirtations, 'n' sech fash'nable quids 'n' quirks. 'N' sez I to Mrs. Tom Johnston, 's afternoon when we see Mrs. Phelps a-ridin' out so sosherble with her own husban',—'I reely feel to think,' sez I—'that her 'n' me may neighbor together after all. 'T stan's t' reason as a woman couldn' live all these years with sech an' angelical man 's Dick Phelps hez been 's man 'n' boy, 'n' me a-knowin' him like a brother this twenty-odd years,' I sez, 'n' not be somethin' domesticated 'n' scrupulous 'n' her mind.' 'N' so, sez I to myself, hearin' that Richard hed gone out o' town on the six 'clock train, Mr. Tom Johnston hevin' seen him at the deep-o when *he* come off the cars,—I'll make so free 's jes' to step right in, bein' a well-wisher, 'n' her husband's ole frien', after all's done 'n' said, though a personal slight acquaintance o' hers, seein her 'n' me don't train ginerally 'n' the same ban', 's one might say,' sez I to F'delia—'ez t' step over 'n' put one single soliterry question to her.'"

"Mr. Lupton!" said Mrs. Phelps's voice, cool, clear and courteous,—"Excuse me, Mrs. Fitchett! Mr. Lupton, may I trouble you to ring the bell? We can talk more satisfactorily when we can see each

other's faces. James!" to that functionary, bowing like an ebony mandarin in the doorway, "light the gas—please!"

"Ketch me goin' out o' my way to be *that* perlite with a nigger!" Mrs. Fitchett interpolated at this point of her account of the interview to F'delia.

"Not for me!" she protested, ineffectually, to her hostess, "I hevn't a minnit to spare. 'Though t'-b'-sure, Mrs. Phelps don' never seem to mind lightin' up the house, all times. Somebody was observin' th' other day, t' my house, as how he guessed the Phelpses wouldn' be quite so *voluminous* here ev'ry night 'n th' week, after they'd hed the pleasure o' payin' a few Freehold gas-bills."

Her gaze followed felt-footed James, as he touched the bronze taper-holder to two bracket-burners, then to the central chandelier. Rex, his hands clasped behind him, stood near the window, apparently attentive to what was passing,—in reality listening for sounds from the stairway up which Salome had flitted, ten minutes ago. Mrs. Phelps occupied a slight reception-chair facing her guest, her dark eyes resting in steadfast civility upon the rubicund visage. For all that appeared in her mien, the extraordinary jargon she had heard might have been the quintessence of sanest ratiocination.

"You were saying that you had a question to ask me," she prompted, the accompanying inclination of the head at once apologetic and suggestive.

"Yes! I never was one to hole t' th' mealy-mouthed trick o' beatin' 'bout th' bush. *I* ain't a mite diplermatical, 'n' I dare say 's Mrs. Phelps can't be

beat at *that* trade, if all I hear is true. I've none but Freehold—*an'* Bible-ways! They've been good enough f' me-'n'-mine, time outer mind! What I come to ask was this—What do Mrs. Phelps or her fam'ly, or household-c'nections, know of a sooperb bookay o' roses, 'n' lilies, 'n' tooby-roses, 'n' gladiolusses, 'n' sech-like rare flowers, I give to Mrs. Rufus Lee, las' night, when she come away from my house, where I'd tea-ed her 'n' her husban' in comp'ny with some o' my pe'tickler frien's?

"I'm perticklar in desirin' o' Mr. Rex Lupton not t' stir out o' this room!" belligerently, as Salome appeared at the door, and he moved toward her. "I hev my reasons for wishin' to hev witnesses to all what transposes in this here scenery. P'raps Mr. Hollis Lee's sister-'n-law may hev persented the said bookay, with her love, to Mrs. Phelps's daughter?" wheeling upon the individual thus designated.

Mrs. Phelps took the word:

"We know nothing whatever of the matter. I can answer for my whole family. Our acquaintanceship with Mrs. Lee is very slight, and we have never heard of the flowers you speak of. I am right, my daughter—am I not?"

"Yes, mamma!"

Salome had not stirred beyond the threshold. Her eyes were riveted upon the catechist with a mixture of disfavor, bewilderment and amusement that provoked a covert smile from Rex. It was ingenuous inspection of a phenomenal specimen of the human race.

"*Then*"—rising so majestically as to upset her chair and one other within the compass of her

flounces—"matters is quadrupelly 'n' thribbly aggravated! Mrs. Lee's ways ain't Freehold ways nor her thoughts ourn! That's been the trouble with her from Alpheus to Oregon, 's one might say. *But* that she sh'd accep' my flowers—the ch'icest prodecks o' my barn 'n' storehouse, 's you may say—that I give her with the most liberales' o' motives, from my own supper-table where she'd been feasted on cut-glass 'n' solid silver, 'n' pampered, 'n' squandered like a queen on her throne, 's you might say, 'n' on her way from my HOUSE, with my v'ice still a-achin' in her years, could shy 'em so fur over your iron fence, or, maybe, through your gate, 's to lodge 'em in a evergreen-tree half-way up the hill—*is* goin' it a leettle too strong 'n' independent for a poor minister's wife! The Bible sez as how them as preach the gospill must expec' to live *by* the gospill. Mr. Rufus Lee 'd better lay them words to heart! Unless I'm mistook in my kalkerlations of the Old North Hill folks, for th' firs' time sence I've been c'nected with it, 'n' I jined under old Dr. Pinner—*she'll* diskiver that the Church 'n' Sassiety is too conservatory to put up with sech shif'less, ungrateful behavior. If Miss S'lomy Phelps"—transfixiug the girl with bovine eyes, all black pupil and red fire—"sh'd happen to run acrosst Mr. Hollis Lee in her unperambulated walks and rides—on an accident, you know—she may name to him in a casualty way, as it were, that pew No. 30 in his brother's church will be ad*ver*tised 'n' th' '*Freehold Landmark*' to-morrer for sale. I hope Mrs. Phelps will excuse me for keepin' her 'n' Mr. Lupton s' long from their conversation, 'n' her daughter from *her* dinner. I c'd

wish to bid Mrs. 'n' Miss Phelps, 'n' Mr. Rex Lupton a respective adjew!"

Deep would have been her disgustful mortification had she guessed how quickly the splash and ripple caused by her visit and rhetoric subsided. The trio with difficulty restrained their laughter until the sound of the elephantine march over the gravel died away,—then gave way to mirth that brimmed and overflowed their eyes.

Mrs. Phelps sobered down with the remark:

"The opera-glass and Fidelia's visit to the lawn are accounted for. Poor Mrs. Lee!"

"Do you suppose that awful woman will carry out her threat, mamma?"

"If she should, my dear, we will buy the pew. Papa and I agreed upon a change of church-relations, this afternoon."

And—"The Old North Hill is to be congratulated upon the exchange of parishioners!"—from Rex, dismissed the theme for one nearer all hearts.

They went into dinner when James salaamed to his mistress in the doorway from which the Vesuvian neighbor had finally withdrawn her foot. Rex gave his arm to the hostess, and, at her request, took the seat opposite hers at table. James waited with impassive visage and the gliding gait on which he prided himself, along with fifty other butler-ish accomplishments. His superiors chatted of impersonal topics with polite composure, Rex addressing Salome naturally and occasionally, as "Miss Phelps," she not once naming him, but replying without diffidence. A fourth person, however well acquainted with them, would not

have suspected the tumultuous flow of emotion that underran the placid surface. So mighty is the sway of breeding, so beneficent in repressive and tempering power is the unwritten code of conventionality.

It was too cool to have coffee on the piazza, the wind having risen since nightfall, and they repaired to the library on quitting the dining-room.

"'Summer is going! Summer is gone!'" quoted Salome. "We should be thankful that it has lingered so long with us. That reminds me, mamma, that we heard that 'wondrous singer,' the thrush, to-day, in a romantic little dingle, a mile or so out of town. Papa said, yesterday, he had never heard him sing so late in the year before."

"Yes, love! We heard them, too, this afternoon. It *is* very late for the shy, sweet things!"

The full, pleasant voice was steadier than her daughter's. There was an odd little break, once in a while, in the girl's bright chat, that, with the sweet fluttering laugh we have noted, were in evidence of happiness too novel and wonderful to be borne with perfect equanimity. Mrs. Phelps made tea and Vienna coffee, poured out a cup of one for herself, of the other for Rex. Salome drank neither. Her unsullied complexion and clear eyes bespoke sound digestion and nerves. It suited Rex's somewhat fastidious ideas that happy excitement did not make her fidgetty—that while the others sipped the evening beverage, she sat quite still on her low chair, with no restless stir of hands or feet. With proprietary pride, he noted her simple, tasteful gown, and that the half-blow red roses she liked to wear ceased to flaunt

after she put them in her belt, becoming, instead, modest foils to her brunette comeliness. Such girls grow into noble women. At twenty-nine, a man, however distractedly in love he may be, appreciates the truth that October has as many days in it as May, and as sure a place in the minuet of months.

By-and-by, the mother went away and left them alone, closing the door after her. The little action had significance. It shut them in together, and put the solid panels between her and the child she loved with a perfectness of passion seldom known to women who are so blessed as to be wedded to paragon husbands—like Richard Phelps. Every drop of blood left her face, as the bolt clicked into place. She pressed her hand hard to her bosom, and waited a moment, with bent head and knotted forehead, until what we name after the French—having no apt phrase of our own for it—"*serrement du cœur*"—relaxed somewhat. She passed, then, head erect, form straight as a lance, up the stairway, along the hall, on to the south room.

The moon was just rising. A broad bar of light, amberine in lustre and tint, lay across the floor to the white bed. She had not slept in it last night, but had lain awake from midnight until sunrise on the sofa at the other side of the room.

The night that had been Gethsemane and Calvary to a soul sorrowful beyond the bitterness of death!

She went, now, directly to the bed, and knelt beside it, remaining thus for many minutes, moveless as the still, lovely form that had last rested there. The wind was shut out by the closed sashes; the moon-

bar whitened and broadened. The place was soundless and awful as a tomb ; the only pulse in the air was from her breath ; the library was too far away for her to hear the hum of lovers' voices ; her husband was a hundred miles distant in one direction, her son as many in another.

Yet, to her apprehension, a presence, viewless, but real, waited upon the conclusion of the prayer that committed her darling's future to another's keeping—a prayer wherein petition for mercy, pardon and patience unto the end, crowded upon humble acknowledgment of blessings unnumbered and unmerited. She had learned, with charity for others, to be very frank with herself.

In rising, she turned, as if to face the Presence—her look level and calm :

"I think you would have it so !" she said, audibly—a distinct, resonant utterance that thrilled startlingly through the hushed chamber. "For six years, you have not left me, sleeping or waking. You see that *this* is GOD'S will—not mine, not yours ! In HIS name, go in peace !"

She had strong will and firm nerves. Churchly exorcism was never more deliberately spoken. The haunting Thing wrought conviction, not dread, although, to-night, it wore, to spiritual vision, the exact lineaments of her lost friend, the unearthly beauty shed upon these as the boy-lover had last beheld them, the nameless radiance that was "something like the reflection of a sunlit wing."

Unlocking a table-drawer, when she had lighted the gas, Mrs. Phelps took out a thick, sealed

envelope. The inscription almost covered one side of it:

"*Should my husband outlive me, I entreat him to read and then burn the contents of this packet. Should the task fall to any other executor, I enjoin that the envelope and enclosures be burned unopened.*

"*Madeline Phelps.*"

She carried it over to the hearth, lighted one corner, and holding it, watched the tindery fragments writhe loose from the blazing mass and drop upon the marble. When all had fallen, she swept them up, and opening the window, threw them out.

She was sitting, book in hand, under the reading lamp in her boudoir, when Salome tapped at the door:

"Rex would like to say 'good-night' to you, mamma." Meeting the loveful glance, she cast herself into her mother's arms, crying out in a transport of grateful affection: "Motherlie! *Motherlie!* Rex says truly that is the one and only name for you! How good you are! Oh! how *good* you are to us!"

Already and forevermore "us!" The mysterious duality of life, which is eternal and truest unity, had begun for them. If the mother-heart shrank, the smile masked the tremor.

Rex met the two in the hall as they came down. The spring in his step, the glad light in eye and on lip, made him years younger and many degrees handsomer than when he had appeared in the drawing-room that evening as Salome's spokesman.

"Forgive me for calling you down," he said, taking

both her hands. "I could not go without thanking you again for your great kindness—your infinite generosity."

Scanning her face wistfully, and with feeling in the tone he would have made playful, he added: "Have I got back my very own friend? Is the frosty film dissipated? Will it never chill me again? I couldn't complain—I had no right—and you treated me better than I deserved, but the change cost me many unhappy hours."

"The love—and the trust in you—were always there, dear boy, whatever my manner may have been. One word of practical matters! I have been thinking all this affair over, and have concluded that it will be best to keep it to our three selves until my husband's return. There can be no positive engagement without his—knowledge." She seemed to substitute the word when on the point of uttering another. "Unless you, Rex, think it due to Mrs. Lupton to take her into confidence?"

"By no means! Isabel is a reasonable woman. You are entirely right. I might *write* to Mr. Phelps!"

"Do not!" quickly. "Let me prepare the way for you, when he comes home. I forewarn you that he will not be so easily won over as I was. Fathers are proverbially intractable, you know, in such circumstances."

Salome glanced up, apprehensively.

"Do you mean, mamma, that we have any reason to be afraid of his decision?"

Rex answered for Mrs. Phelps. They were still

grouped in the hall, and he had taken his hat, but delayed leave-taking, as the manner of engaged men is. The chandelier overhead showed a graver expression than he had worn a minute before.

"Not afraid, certainly, but not confident. I have explained to Salome, motherlie!" the happy light returning with the tentative word, "the surprise that befell me with the summing-up of last year's profits. I knew we were doing better than ever before since I took charge of the business, but hardly dared hope that the result would justfy me in thinking of a home of my own within another twelvemonth. When I bore her off last night—*was* it only twenty-four hours ago?—to walk among the roses, I was fairly daft with the delight of the discovery. But I am not a rich man yet. I may never be. Mr. Phelps has a right to look higher than a mill-owner who has so little of his own that the prospect of a moderate income turns his head. I was not surprised that the convolvulus got up long before day to stare at me. It was more like a miracle that the rest of the morning-glories slept through it all!"

Such happy nonsense as it was to the three! When they had laughed him away, with another sprig of honeysuckle in his button-hole, begged from and affixed by Salome, while her mother stepped back to caution James to shut up the house carefully in his master's absence, the two ladies strolled the length of the portico many times before they could leave the outer scene. The sweet dampness of the air freighted with honeysuckle odors, the glimmer of the newly-washed sward in the moonbeams, the lights and

shadows of the sleeping town, were so many lures to the possible imprudence.

"Motherlie!" the tender girl-voice at length stole upon the charmed stillness. "You will not be angry if I tell you something?"

"You never anger me, love. To-night you cannot!"

"We, Rex and I, talked this evening of his first love, your friend!"

The muscles of the arm encircling her stiffened, but there was no other signal of emotion; the answering tone was even and gentle.

"That was well and inevitable, at least with a man like Rex Lupton. I should have been surprised had he remained silent on the subject."

"He loved her very fondly, mamma. I think all the more of him for that. I have always thought her fate the saddest I ever knew of. To-night I cannot be sorry enough for her. Rex reverences her memory as he does his mother's. He says the only comfort he has had in all these years of mourning was in a sort of blind faith that his pretty mother who died when he was a little boy, had sought out in heaven the woman who loved him so truly here, and that they were together. You may think it singular that I am not jealous of his beautiful early betrothed, mamma, but I cannot be. She loved and lost him, poor girl! and I love—*and—have—him!*"

They made a slow turn in silence, and yet another before Salome halted at the almost circular rift in the vine-curtain, and thrust her spirited young head through the opening.

"When I do this I can see the light in his windows. Sitting on the piazza, at a certain angle from the loop-hole, I have watched for him, night after night, when nobody suspected, not daring to ask myself why I did it. I did not know, nor that he cared for me until this morning when he coaxed me to give him a bit of honeysuckle, and I saw something in his eyes that *frightened* me! Motherlie, will you answer me one question?"

"As many as you choose to ask, dear child."

"Why, do you suppose, he began to like me? Don't think me vain, but do I resemble *her* in any respect?"

"God forbid!"

"Mamma! *what* did you say?

"That you are *yourself*, my darling, and I would not have you changed in one trait or feature. Furthermore, that Rex will not be consoled, if you take cold in this treacherous climate, by the intelligence that you got it while talking of him!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ON the fourth day after the betrothal among the cathedral pines, Mrs. Lupton invited Mrs. and Miss Phelps to meet the Lees at a quiet family dinner, such as sensibly-mitigated woe might indulge in without violence to the proprieties.

"I invite the clerical combination from a mixture of politic and benevolent motives," she explained, airily, to her step-son. "The Lees are wofully out of place in church and community—the wife, especially. She must continually be in a state of semi-asphyxia, and a breath of native air would revive her. Loving my neighbor as myself, I do my best to give it to her."

"*A la bonne heure!*" responded the diverted listener, as she showed no disposition to proceed." So much for benevolence! But where does policy come in—may I inquire?"

A heap of flowers was on the table, beside which she stood, arranging them in various receptacles—her daily task, as it was Salome's. Their different ways of doing the same thing were interesting and characteristic. At the Phelps house, roses were clustered in great bowls; lilies, among their own leaves in tall jars, with no other flowers, and beds of smaller blossoms were made in damp moss laid on shallow dishes. Most of Mrs. Lupton's vases were small, and held only a flower or two. A Dresden Cupid carried

a rosebud and geranium leaf in his quiver; a slender, long-necked glass held a stem of tuberoses; an old blue china vase—an heirloom—a single Japan lily, clear pink, freckled with fire.

Her head was turned slightly toward the left shoulder, her mouth was pursed meditatively; her fingers coaxed stiff stems into grace; fondled pliant—she appeared to forget all else in her work. Her eyebrows perked perplexedly before she replied:

"Eh! what? Oh! my diplomacy! The Phelpses have taken up the Lees, you know. 'Very much so!' as Freeholders say. There is a wheel within a wheel in this partnership scheme of 'Phelps and Lee.' One band runs over both. I might have thought—had I troubled myself to form independent opinions of my friend's concerns—that they might look higher, or, at least, longer, for a *sposo* for a girl who has been half-over the globe and will inherit half of a handsome fortune. A parsonage-bred country lawyer would hardly seem to 'fill the bill.' But, to give you a French comfit in exchange for yours—*ce n'est pas mon affaire!* My cue is to keep on amicable terms with my nearest and most desirable of neighborhood. I like the Phelpses—one and all—the father least of them, perhaps, because he needs other people's liking so little. They do more than the rest of Freehold combined to reconcile me to life in a pill-box—*with* the top on! Monsieur, if not Madame, has decreed that his daughter shall become Mrs. Hollis Lee who is brother to Rev. Rufus Lee, and brother-in-law to Mrs. Rufus. *Ergo*, I cotton to the Lees."

Rex's face was absolutely impassive.

"What commissions have you for me this morning? Can I do anything down-town to further your philanthropic diplomatic designs?"

Having received the brief memorandum he subjoined: "As I must come up in good season for dinner, do not expect me home to luncheon."

The step-mother smiled over her flowers several times when he had gone—more widely than she allowed herself to do in others' sight—conscious, as she could not but be, if she had ever executed the grimace before a mirror, that her mouth was feline when thus expanded, the corners running back too far and too deeply into her cheeks. She made a dispassionate study of all her points, good and bad.

The same wide smile straightened her lips when word was brought to her, at ten o'clock, that "Miss Phelps would like to speak with her for a few minutes."

One of the unpopular habits common to Mrs. Phelps and Mrs. Lee—both "foreigners"—was that they never encouraged people to "run in," or being "in," to run up or down, as the hostess chanced to be in chambers or basement. They entered nobody's door, however hospitably it might yawn an invitation to unceremoniousness, without ringing the bell, and when admitted, turned into parlors or reception-room and sent up their name in decorous form.

Salome had tripped across the lawn without mantle or card-case, but she requested—not forced—an interview.

"Maggie!" said the mistress with the affable

dignity she always used toward her dependants, "I wish you would take these books to Mr. Gerald's room, and bring me one with a red back and green sides from the left-hand corner of the top shelf of his book-case. 'The Reader's Handbook' is the name on the back. The *left-hand* corner, Maggie! I think Miss Phelps has called for the book. Be quick, please! and after you have found it, run down and ask her if she will be good enough to step upstairs."

At least three minutes elapsed before the crest-fallen maid reappeared.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I can't find the book you mintion, nor none like it, at all, at all!"

Her mistress was in the hall, near the open door of her room, apparently impatient of her tardiness.

"No? well, never mind! I will explain to Miss Phelps. Go, now, and ask her to come up. You need not show her the way. Go back to your work."

Evidently *her* work lay in a variety of places that day. She called to Salome from another open door which the girl was passing without turning her head. Since Maggie saw her, Mrs. Lupton had donned a muslin sweeping-cap, and laid hold of a duster.

"Excuse me for troubling you to climb the stairs, but I am in working costume, as you see," she said, cordially. "This chamber is wanted for the men's dressing-room to-night, and Rex asked me to put some things out of the way before they invade his premises. Sit down there!" wheeling around a chair. "You wont mind if I go on with the little left for me to do?"

"Certainly not!"

She panted slightly, her color fluctuating as she breathed.

While she spoke, she looked directly at her companion with large, timid eyes, like those of a hare that espies an intruder, while knowing itself to be unseen.

"It is I who should apologize for my unseasonable call. I want you to be perfectly sincere in answering the question I came to ask. My friend, Anna Marcy, of whom you have heard me speak, arrived at Mr. Lee's last night. Mrs. Lee is her cousin. Will it be entirely convenient and agreeable to you to ask her here this evening? I shall call there this forenoon, and will take a message to that effect, or make her comprehend why she is not invited, should it be incompatible with your arrangements to add another to your company. Mamma thought it hardly probable that you could make room for her at this late hour. A dinner-party is such an inexorable "institution!"

Her cheeks were cooling, but her gaze was still direct. She glanced at nothing.

"Maiden alarms!" thought the even-pulsed observer. "I have taken her by surprise."

"The very thing I have been trying to compass all the morning!" she cried, in frank delight, that was nothing short of genius. "Gerald—yes!—I know I spoil the monkey—has taken a notion that he should be allowed a seat at the table this evening. Here was my plan: Dr. Williams, as a charming old man, and your grandfather's friend, is to take your mother in to dinner; Mr. Clayton, Miss Williams. He admires her *inordinately!* Hollis Lee will take

you; Rex, Mrs. Lee; and Mr. Rufus Lee, myself, as a matter of course. So, I informed my son and heir that his pert presence would destroy the equilibrium of my board, and he sulked outrageously. He thinks Miss Marcy 'no end of fun,' and if she will overlook his tender years and bumptiousness, I don't see how we could get on without her. I will scribble off a note to welcome her as a special Providence to the weak-minded mother of a recalcitrant urchin, and say how charmed I shall be to see her on her own account and on yours. Wait one minute—please!"

She ran out of the room and was back in an instant, portfolio in hand; drew up a chair to Rex's desk, and fell to work upon a sheet with the then fashionable (and always abominable) nibbled edges. Her hand ambled over the roughened surface of the Irish linen, leaving a trail of flowing, dashing characters after it. As she wrote, she smiled indulgence of Gerald's whim, and hospitality, boundless and free, to Miss Marcy.

Salome broke the bonds of her foolish bashfulness and looked about her with an effort at unconcern. Mrs. Lupton lodged the son of his father in style befitting the heir apparent. Hangings, walls, carpet, and furniture were in excellent taste and of the best quality. This much and no more had his betrothed seen when her attention was attracted to an easel set exactly in the line of her observation. It was of ebony, richly carved, and supported a frame made after the pattern of what are known as "tabernacles"—with hinged leaves parting in the middle and fastening with a lock. They were open, now, revealing

a life-size portrait. Salome recognized it at once. The painting was exquisite, Rex having had a photograph copied by the most distinguished portrait-artist in New York. The likeness was remarkable for fidelity. The gown of dark-blue velvet, trimmed with silver-fox fur, enhanced the dazzling fairness of the wearer's skin, and brought out the golden sheen of her hair. The bow of the short upper lip, the slight pout of the lower, the noble turn of chin and cheek, the straight, Grecian nose, the low arch of the brows, the liquid brightness of the eyes, with the never-absent hint of sadness darkening their depths —the whole fine, refined, imperial face—were what Salome had carried in her memory of almost a third part of her young life. The gaze of the shining eyes seemed to spring out upon hers in meeting; to claim insistently that she should look, and remember, and ponder.

"You are a child!" they said, with the fine disdain of the curving mouth. "A thing to chase the sadness of a world-beaten man for a few hours. Little better than a doll—a baby! Behold the woman—magnificent in beauty and grace and intellect—whom Rex Lupton loved! the woman who loved him!"

Red glints were in Mrs. Lupton's hazel orbs as, glancing up from the written page, she noted the attitude of the subject under vivisection. Salome's face was in profile, but the contour had been touched with a sharp chisel since her kind neighbor began her note. Piteous lines depressed the mobile mouth; her entire being drooped under the sad, proud eyes.

"You are admiring that painting!" The lady said it so smoothly and easily that the other did not start. "As a work of art, it is admirable. Rex must have paid a ruinous sum for it—" and she named the artist. "The likeness is marvellous. You remember her, of course?"

"Perfectly! The girl mastered a contraction of the throat before she uttered the word in her usual voice. "It is, as you say, a wonderful likeness."

"I had not noticed that the doors were open," continued Mrs. Lupton, pressing the blotter upon the wet lines. "It seldom happens that it is left unlocked. Rex treasures it so jealously that I doubt if one of the children has ever seen it. I heard him walking the floor last night, and guessed at the cause of his disquiet. He must have been sadly distraught, to leave his choicest possession exposed to others' eyes. He confessed to me once that he spent many hours of each night in gazing at his lost love, although he knew he must pay the penalty in sleeplessness afterward. He idolized her—poor girl! and the more wildly that she was his superior in knowledge of the world, in social accomplishments—in every external advantage that a beautiful, gifted woman could have over a shy, almost uncouth boy. She read him more truly than we. Like Michael Angelo, she saw the angel in cold marble. Heigho! Regrets are useless—but what a man she might have made of him! 'I lost my one opportunity in life with her!' he said to me, last Sunday week, when he came in from the walk to her grave he takes in all weathers on Sunday afternoon. Do you get a good light on

the face from your point of view?" gently flicking dust from the frame with her soft cloth.

"Excellent—thank you!"

"I must put it out of sight before evening. Did you know that he would not have her engagement ring taken from her finger? It was buried with her. 'I am married to her with it for time and for eternity,' he said to his father, who remonstrated against the folly. Ah, there is a loyal heart, if ever there was one. Yet, I wish he would marry. I hope, sometimes, that he may yet be brought to consider that his duty to his family demands this sacrifice of romantic memories, and when you know Rex Lupton well, you will comprehend that duty is his only rule of faith and practice.

"I am afraid all this un-step-motherly effusiveness bores you. It could hardly be otherwise. Rex is one of my pet weaknesses. He is as good as gold and true as steel. It is not strange that I should covet for him what he will not seek for himself—a wife and home of his own.

"Don't go! At least, give me a hint as to my floral decorations. They are tame and tasteless, when compared with yours. What can one expect of an elderly woman with no grown daughters, and no hope of a daughter-in-law to educate her in the minor elegancies?"

Salome praised everything with feverish volubility; her cheeks were like velvet rose-leaves; her voice was a little strained, but bell-like in speech and laugh. When she had got herself away, and trod up the slope with the free, erect carriage of youth and strength, the

red hazel eyes followed her in genuine admiration the while the feline smile was none the less coldly cruel.

"Thoroughbred!" she said, inwardly; "but military necessity knows no higher law than itself!"

She returned to Rex's chamber; shut the tabernacle-leaves, locked them and deposited the key in the desk drawer from which she had taken it while Maggie was hunting in vain frenzy for "The Reader's Handbook."

The gentlemen invited to partake of her gracious cheer that evening laid off their hats and dusted their boots in a chamber on the other side of the hall. The unconscious step-son was left in undisturbed possession of his quarters until it was time to go down to receive the guests.

The fair relict was in deep waters at this date, but kept her head well. Her nervous system was exceptional in equipoise, as we have seen, and she had reduced economy of forces to a science.

While she did not scruple to lie artistically and effectively to secure an end that justified the stretch of conscience, she never wasted clever fabrications, and when truth would serve the purpose as well as falsehood, gave it the preference, as less dangerous to handle. Her husband had detected her in lies many times, and admired the dexterity with which she averted the consequences of her indiscretion. A long series of audacious business enterprises had taught him the value of skilful prevarication. He loved the "best of women" not one whit the less for her tact and address in this style of composition, and respected her talents the more. His son was built of such different stuff that

the wise step-parent had never let him doubt her honesty. She had even told him needless, and to her inconvenient, truths on divers occasions. His wits being duller than his father's, there would have seemed to be no expediency in taking such pains to keep on his blind side, but Mrs. Lupton would never have been lavish with ammunition until she saw the scaling ladders brought to the front against her beseiged city.

From which figure the astute reader may divine that she had calculated danger and defences shrewdly in the morning interview, and not told one fib too many. What she had seen through the gap in the roadside bank had taken her by surprise; a fact that wrought her up to anger with herself, and well-grounded alarm for the perpetuity of her best-laid plans. She did full justice to Rex's steadfastness of heart and will. As with most slow, determined natures, the pertinacity of his affections was laid in doggedness, and hardened, not mellowed by time. That the retrospective habit which had reversed the natural direction of the lights and shadows of a young man's life should have been exchanged, in so short a time, for fervent longings and eager anticipations more in consonance with his sex and age, was to her dazed apprehension incredible even now. To one thing she was fully awake. Rex's marriage would materially damage the prospects of herself and children, relegate her to a dowager's position, and, possibly, involve her removal to a dower-house—one of the numerous "genteel family residences" erected by her late consort. She had counted upon the reversion of Rex's share of the fine estate to his half-brothers and sisters, and

been over-confident of her ability to make his confirmed bachelorhood perpetual.

A sensitive woman would have expended cellular tissue in wounded feeling that he should basely repay her tireless endeavor to make him so comfortable in celibacy as never to feel the lack of wife and home. Rating other people by herself, she ignored the injury. Had she been in his place, she would have done what was for her own advantage. He might be misled, and to his hurt; but not a line in the course she chalked out for herself was deflected by sympathy or consideration for him.

A less wily diplomatist would have cautioned Salome to secrecy on the subject of the portrait and her divulgation of Rex's confidences. Counting boldly upon the girl's delicacy and pride, she ran no risk of exciting doubts as to her statements and the motive for making them. Nobody understood better than she that an overdose of poison would react to nullify itself.

She set her human chessmen in order on the board while arraying herself in mourning silk and fleecy tulle for the evening game. Rufus Lee, Mrs. Lee and Miss Marcy were pawns. The superior pieces were herself, first; next, with fine instinct, she ranked Mrs. Phelps. Hollis Lee was third in importance. The game could not be played without him. Then Salome, lastly Rex. Should she lose beyond repair, by means of strategy or reprisal, she had in reserve a play of another and deadlier sort, the parallel to which was never furnished by Hoyle or Murphy. Two figures would fight it out on the same

board. She had considered cost and strength, and believed she knew also who would be the winner.

Gerald was strutting through the parlors when she entered them. I will not insult the intelligence of the reader who has studied the mother thus far with me by remarking that the boy had never dreamed of joining the dinner company until, on his return from school that noon, the affectionate parent informed him of the addition to the party in the shape of Miss Marcy, and her plan that he should be her attendant.

The youth patronizingly took the matter into consideration.

"She's awfully fat!" he concluded. "The fellows would chaff me no end if they were to hear of it. But I can hold my tongue, and it will be a jolly 'feed.' Yes! I'll offer myself up a sacrifice to make things even all around!"

He furthermore exacted as "boot," a white satin cravat and a pair of patent leather "Oxford ties," the splendor of which caught his brother's eye when he ran lightly down the stairs, very elegant in irreproachable evening costume, so handsome and high-bred looking that Gerald greeted him with:

"Hello, Rex! you're stunninger than common, even for you. How *do* you do it, old fellow?"

"Oh, I began with satin chokers and glossy boots," retorted the elder, encouragingly. "Perseverance and a good opinion of one's self will carry you on to perfection. Isabel! is our party to be graced by the infant phenomenon? That wasn't on the bill, was it?"

"Gerald dines with us to accommodate me," an-

swered she, imperturbably good-humored, and proceeded to describe the dilemma.

Rex's countenance changed at the recital; he dropped his bantering tone.

"Shake hands, my boy!" he said to the juvenile gallant. "You are more of a gentleman than your brother was when he tried to tease you for throwing yourself into the breach. I honor your desire to please your mother, and be courteous to Miss Marcy."

His genial mood for several days past had not escaped his step-mother's attention, nor did the unwonted restlessness that led him first to one window, then to the other, under no pretext at all, and lastly to a lingering saunter through rooms and hall. Nothing more effectually disgusts a person who has never been in love than the survey of the symptoms of the malady as exhibited by another. Mrs. Lupton had never liked her husband's son less than during the fifteen minutes of waiting that preceded the arrival of the company.

He showed himself a graceful host, seconding the welcome of the *châtelaine* with spontaneous ease, for which the Lees were not prepared. In the interval before the announcement of dinner, he passed from one to another with apt word and ready smile, neglecting none, yet never losing a motion of the white-robed figure that, turned partly away from him, hearkened with dangerous intentness to something Hollis Lee was telling her. Ere long a certain change in the air affected Rex unpleasantly. The electrical currents were reversed; his heart called vainly for the silent

response that had not before failed him when they were in the same room, since the hour in which they had clasped hands across the saddle-bow, and the pine-boughs whispered the news to one another high overhead.

At table, Salome sat half way up the table, Rufus Lee on one side, Hollis on the other,—a fortuitous circumstance, for Isabel was too well-bred to offer object-lessons to her guests. Anna Marcy's arrival had disjointed her original design. Salome's bloom deepened as the repast went on. She talked much with the two nearest her, Hollis basking so palpably in her presence that Rex inly "confounded his impudence," while Rufus's benignant smile had a touch of patriarchal proprietorship yet harder to tolerate. As a rule, Isabel's entertainments had the unqualified approval of her sedate step-son. Business methods and innate chivalry had made his taste in these things somewhat formal. A violation of conventional usage was, to his apprehension, license, and license was an offence. But this dinner was needlessly long, and the company ill-assorted.

"The glacial area extended just a quarter of the way up the table on both sides," wrote Anna Marcy to her mother, of the affair. "Ethel was frozen stiff. I, thanks to adipose tissue, merely benumbed. Gerald's torpor affected his tongue, but not his jaws. Miss Williams shivered occasionally, but the ardor of her escort brought her off safely without a positive ague. Beyond her, Mrs. Phelps on one side, Salome—the incarnation of sunshine—on the other, made summer weather."

"Another Lee, as I live!" ejaculated the glacier, mentally, as the first object he beheld when the gentlemen rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room, was Salome in close conversation with Hollis's sister-in-law. "This is becoming unbearable!"

He did not modify the adjective when Hollis marched straight over to the pair and became a third in the confabulation. The young fellow was handsome to-night, "impertinently good-looking—considering!" the malcontent put it, grinding his teeth upon the final word. The senseless babble in the rooms was loud enough without any contribution from himself. He withdrew to the adjoining library with Dr. Williams, who wanted to consult a rare work purchased by the elder Reginald shortly before his death. While they were turning it over, a skilful prelude told that Salome's fingers were on the key-board.

"A masterly touch!" said the pundit, pricking up his ears. "Don't let me detain you!"

"Thank you! One can hear as well here."

He might have added, "and *see!*" Salome played prelude and accompaniment for Hollis, as he sang the never-out-of-date "Three Fishers." His voice was a melodious baritone, his style was good, and the uncritical audience listened with pleasure to this and "O, Happy Day!" that answered the *encore*.

Rex strayed back into the drawing-room in time to catch the drift of the discussion over the third ballad, which was named by Mrs. Lupton.

"What is it that Miss Phelps does not think she can play?" queried Rex of Anna Marcy, in a low tone.

Salome's visible reluctance surprised him, aware as he was of her musical proficiency.

Anna's eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Nothing! if you want to put it in that way! She doesn't *want* to accompany Hollis in 'When the Flowing Tide Comes In.'"

Mrs. Lupton overheard the words.

"Which I affirm solemnly I heard her singing like an angel not a week ago, one moonlight night, as I sat on my porch," she protested. "I haven't had it out of my head since."

"Perhaps it was I whom you overheard?" said Mrs. Phelps, coming forward, laughingly, and as her daughter arose with alacrity, taking her place on the piano-stool. "It is one of *my* songs, Mr. Lee! I will accompany you with pleasure."

The proposal was made with such frank cordiality that he could do no less than accept it gratefully. Rex offered his arm to Salome, as she glanced around for a seat, and led her to a distant sofa, standing silently behind her while the song—*their* song—was sung. At the close he bent nearer to her ear: "Thank you for not playing it!"

The swift, upward glance into which she was surprised showed him a glaze of unshed tears.

"What is it, darling?" he leaned over again to say. And, trying to speak playfully, "Am I in disgrace to-night, that you have not vouchsafed me a word or look? Do you know that I am furiously jealous of the fellow who is trying to sing himself into your favor?"

"You have no cause to be!" She said it in a sort

of sad composure, but still looked across the room, and not at him. "The poor boy is in sad trouble, and I have been trying to cheer him up. I will tell you all about it, some time.

However her heart might ache she was superior to the temptation that would have goaded a meaner spirit into retaliation. The candid, upright nature was revealed in the simple declaration—"You have no cause to be!"

Mrs. Lupton intercepted the lover's answer, as she swam over to them radiantly persuasive.

"My sweet child! you won't refuse me two favors in one night? won't let Mr. Lee—what a charming vocalist he is!—outdo you in complaisance? I want you to sing my second-best favorite, the loveliest thing Sullivan ever did, and under the absurdest name, 'Sweethearts.' No! Mr. Hollis Lee! it is *not* a comic song! On the contrary, I shall have no respect for you if it does not break your heart. It always breaks mine into macadamized powder. Come, Salome! be merciful and repeat the operation!"

Rex joined in the general laugh as he conducted his silent betrothed to the piano, but he was secretly disquieted by her smileless acquiescence in the hostess's behest.

We all know the ballad she rendered with matchless pathos. The air, little more than a recitative, which tells of the exchange of flowers at the parting of the declared lover and the as yet unbetrothed maiden. How she dallied with the gift; feigned to throw it away, yet treasured it all her life; how he swore to keep his, and cast it aside, "before the petals fell";

the abrupt breaking in upon monotony of music and story of a wild, plaintive measure that swings in ear and heart for days—

> "O, love for a year, a week, a day!
> But alas! for the love that loves alway!"

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps says in her inimitable way of seeming to remind us of what is patent to everybody—only we never happened to say it (and never would!)

"There is a vague monotony in the process of wearing pleasure. Happy people are very much alike. In the great republic of joy, we find tremendous and humiliating levels. When we lift our heads to bear the great crown of pain, all the 'points' of the soul begin to make themselves manifest at once."

Mrs. Lupton's choice of her second-best favorite was clever play, with no more feeling in the move than if the sentient heart under her taper finger were made of dead ivory. The pose of the songstress, as she left the instrument, was queenly. She recognized pain, by now, for what it was, and, the first dismay over, rallied her powers to endure it. It was a novel experience, met as her mother's daughter should confront it. She would not sing again, nor did she trust herself to another *tête-à-tête* with him whose "love had loved alway" that beautiful dead woman; but neither did she let herself think of the fair face shut in behind jealously-locked doors upstairs. She bore her part in dialogue and general talk, and smiled consent to Hollis Lee's petition preferred soon after dinner, that he might see her home.

The boy had worn a harassed look for much of the evening when he was not talking or singing, and at the door accosted Mrs. Phelps, who, under Dr. Williams's convoy, had reached home before the young people, and waited for them on the piazza.

"Will you let me come in for a few minutes? I wish to consult you about a perplexing affair."

Upon obtaining permission he followed the ladies into the library.

"Don't go, Miss Phelps!" seeing Salome hesitate on the threshold. "You know all the details of the scrape, and may plead for mercy with my judge."

The "scrape" was serious. The withered bouquet he had flung away had blossomed anew, as expeditiously as Aaron's rod, and more luxuriantly. The story of the ingratitude and slight practised by pastor and pastoress upon the woolliest of the flock, and of her unlamblike but just revenge, was running through Freehold and its environs like a prairie-fire before a tornado. In vain had the real culprit openly proclaimed his guilt and the innocence of his relatives. The church was up in arms; every tongue wagged one way, and that in condemnation of the luckless pair who had "never been quite like Freehold folks," and therefore must have been cut cut and made up askew.

Mrs. Phelps was gravely regretful, and, as Hollis had foreseen, ready with active sympathy.

"I wish Mr. Phelps were at home!" she said. "But I will write the whole story to him to-morrow. He is a great favorite with Mrs. Fitchett, and may have influence to change her decision. It cannot be

be possible, in this Christian age, that such a trifle could result in serious disaster. It will all blow over, you may be sure. Fireless smoke always does."

Salome sat by, silent and heavy-eyed, but sufficiently interested in what was going on as not to turn eye or ear to the window into which Rex Lupton glanced in treading lightly up the piazza steps.

Careless of the chance of exciting Isabel's suspicions, he had taken his hat upon the departure of the other guests, and come over for a more satisfactory good-night than that exchanged in the sight of all. He was not jealous of his rival, if jealousy be inseparable from doubt of the affection of his betrothed wife. But he would not have another man imagine for one deluded second, that Salome could ever belong to *him;* was miserly of looks and smiles shed upon the self-duped suitor. With the mad hunger of a nature long starved, he wanted to have her all to himself, and chafed at the delay of the moment when he might announce to the world that no other claim could compete with his.

He paused for a whole minute, irresolute—looking through the casement at the fair young creature seated in her low chair, her elbow on her mother's knee, her chin cradled in her palm, the filmy folds of her evening dress lying like still heaps of mist on the carpet, her dark, earnest eyes bent on the handsome visage of the speaker.

"He looks like a more suitable partner for her than I!" thought the unseen observer with a pang. "But he shall never take her from me, however passionately

he may love and woo. What is that boy's love to mine?"

As stealthily as he had drawn near, he retired.

Salome raised herself wearily when Hollis had gone.

"I am tired! tired! *tired!* mamma!"

"I know it, my love. Go directly to bed. I will look in upon you before you can fall asleep."

She did this on six nights out of seven. The pair, as Richard complained, "were never talked out."

The chamber was dark and the child had laid herself among the pillows, when the mother tapped at the door. She carried a taper which she set on a table so remote from the bed that the features of the occupant were indistinctly seen. Sitting upon the bedside she met the seeking hand with a caress, and fondled the hot, tremulous fingers.

"My darling did not enjoy the evening as much as I hoped she would," said the full, soft voice that brought with the hearing, comforting assurance of strength and love.

Her children had grown up with the persuasion that "mamma" could right all wrongs. Her husband had said once of her: "Were my wife, in any strait, to lose heart, and confess herself baffled, I should incontinently blow my brains out. The end of all things would have come for me."

Salome nestled nearer to her. One unsteady hand stole up to the cool, firm cheek.

"It wasn't the evening only, mamma! I have had a heartache nearly all day. I hoped that I had hidden it."

"You were very brave, sweet one. Very successful in concealing it from all eyes except mine, and Rex's. He watched you anxiously all the evening."

The fingers fluttered, but the girl made no verbal response, and the mother forbore further direct questioning.

"Mrs. Lupton asked me, to-night, if it were true that your engagement to Hollis Lee would be announced as soon as papa got back. She has heard it authoritatively asserted several times, she says."

Salome stirred fretfully.

"How absurd!" she sighed. "I hope you told her that neither of us ever thought of such a thing. As if the poor boy had not enough to annoy him without furnishing more gossip for ill-natured people! Mamma, what a slight thing will darken the world for one!"

"My girlie must not magnify motes. Her sky ought to be all fair, just now."

"It was—until—" She drew the comforter down to her pillow, laid a wet, burning cheek against hers. "I saw *her* picture to-day! Quite by accident. Mrs. Lupton was at work in that room, and called me upstairs. I had forgotten how beautiful she was. I am such a poor thing by comparison! I have seen nothing but that face—thought of nothing but how they loved one another, ever since. Don't despise me! Hold me closer, mamma! I have been haunted by the thought that I am robbing *her*—that her right must always be superior to mine—have felt lonely and far off from *Rex!*"

The troubled whisper died into silence as troubled. No answer followed at once—other than kiss after kiss on hair, lips, and eyes, and such fervor of embrace that the child could hardly breathe.

"My precious one! my pure, noble, loving little daughter!" said the sweet voice in an agony of tenderness, yet with a ring of keener emotion.

She put the girl abruptly out of her arms; went over to the taper and set a shade before it; returning to the bed to stand beside it; attitude and tone so unlike the passion of the previous moment that the listener was alarmed.

"Salome! daughter! never repeat to any one—least of all, to Rex — what I am about to tell you. I have never breathed it until now. Rex Lupton's first betrothed did *not* love him! Her heart was entirely given to another. If she had lived, he must have found this out."

A shuddering gasp escaped the listener.

"Mamma, are you *sure?* Had you proof?"

"As strong as heaven! as *terrible* as never-dying fires!"

The girl groped in the darkness to wrap her arms about the bowed form. The tense, hoarse tone was utterly unfamiliar.

"It was dreadful for *you!* She was your dearest friend! But oh, I thank GOD that my poor dear never guessed it! He never must! he never shall!"

And with wild weeping of—"How could she? how *could* she deceive him?" she sobbed the bitterness out of her heart.

"One question!" clinging to her mother, as she

regained composure. "Did that other—man—know it?"

"Yes!"

"And returned it? Knowing her to be betrothed to this true, honorable lover?"

"Yes!"

"You would not like to tell me his name—that I might despise him knowingly?"

"It would not be right. You will probably never know him."

"I *would* not! The base hound!"

"Salome!"

"I mean it, mamma! It was well she died! Did she confess it to you?"

"No. There was a letter. I found it after the—accident. By will, she left the examination of her papers to me."

"And all this you have borne alone! Does papa know?"

"I said that I have told no one but you. Now, put it out of your thoughts!"

The girl held her fast, as she would have moved.

"I can understand why you shielded her from papa's blame. With his strict sense of honor, and his love for you, he would have judged her very harshly. How merciful, how considerate, how *loyal* you are! And she is beyond the reach of it all, now! the pain, and the censure—poor, unhappy woman! Mamma, is it very wicked that I cannot help being thankful that Rex never *really* belonged to anybody else? He doesn't know it—but what matter so long as *I* do?"

Mrs. Lupton was not habitually an early riser.

With her perfect balance of nerves and commendatory conscience, she slept like a wearied child with whom dentition is a past grief. She lifted her pure heart fervently in acknowledgment to the unknown deity who awoke her at an unseasonable hour on the morning succeeding the dinner-party, by the recollection of certain undistributed orders which the servants appointed to clear up the disordered rooms should have had overnight.

Thrusting her feet into slippers, and casting a dressing-gown about her, she descended to the scene of operations. On the hat-rack in the hall lay a letter. A square white envelope, addressed in Mrs. Phelps's hand to "*Mr. Rex Lupton.*"

"When did this come?" she inquired, judicially.

"Just a minute ago, ma'am!" responded Maggie from the drawing-room.

"It should not be left here in the dust."

While she gave her gentle, explicit directions, she felt that the edges of the closed flap of the envelope were still damp. By the time she gained the first landing, her delicate forefinger had overcome the loosely-cohering gum. Had it been more tenacious, five minutes over a cup of boiling water would have accomplished the desired result.

"Dear Rex," Mrs. Phelps had written hastily, "I must have been more blind than you were had I not seen last night that our dear girl was ill-at-ease. Since the opportunity to dispel the slight cloud was not permitted to you, I, acting in your interest, undertook the task where we reached home.

"Without going into details, let me intimate as

gently as is possible in the circumstances, that she is *haunted.* This is strictly confidential. I need not caution you to exceeding tact and delicacy in dealing with our darling in this regard. We—you and I—will not speak again of the matter. I thought you ought to know what was the origin of the shadow you noticed. In haste, yours, MAMMA."

"So–o–o!" The reader's features wore an expression of unfeigned regret, tinged with benevolent commiseration, while she touched the inside of the flap with her mucilage-brush and pressed it down. "I am sorry she would enter the lists; I would not hurt the brave creature if it could be avoided. And a scene is—a *scene!* But, Allah il Allah!"

When Rex presented himself rather late in the breakfast-room, the sealed letter lay by his plate.

CHAPTER XV.

"WELL! if this *ain't* a Proverdince!"

Richard Phelps looked up from the morning paper he was reading at his ease in the parlor-car.

Mrs. Fitchett's florid face, like the sun in a drouth, shone upon him from the next chair in front. She must have occupied it for several minutes, for the train was drawing out of the Boston station; her parcels were disposed in the rack overhead; she had unpinned and thrown back her wrap. She always travelled "in style." Her diamond ear-rings, black silk gown trimmed with steel passementerie, her lace collar and India shawl, advertised her as Somebody. The fat hand she gave her neighbor was done up in a span new glove, tan-colored, embroidered with scarlet-and-black.

"To think I shouldn't 'a' noticed you 'tell I turned 'roun'!" she continued. "I can't never abide t' face the ingin'. You gits all the dust, an' can't see a soul. So I wheels my chair right about face, 'n' sez I t' myself, 'I want to know! If that ain't Richard Phelps behind that paper, why then it's his twin-brother!" sez I, "an' here I've sot for full three minutes an' ain't never sensed that there was an acquaintance on the car!"

"I am glad it was not my twin!" responded the gentleman, gallantly. "Did you drop from the skies

that I did not see you come in? How long have you been in Boston?"

"I come up yest'day. Stayed at th' *Tree*-mount last night, bein' jest fair wore out with a hard day's shoppin'. Been spendin' money by the bale 'n' crate, you bet! Why, my bill to Jordan 'n' Marsh's was 'nough fur to give a body an attack o' articuler mortars, 's you might say!"

"*Articulo mortis!*" translated the tickled auditor, mentally. "Nothing could be finer! How Madeline and Salome will enjoy that!"

Aloud, he remarked: "As a good citizen, you ought to appreciate the ability to put so much money into general circulation."

"Indeed, then, I don't! Yest'day being stockholders' day on th' Borst'n 'n' Alb'ny Railroad, I come down free t' save the fare. I ain't above savin' a penny hones'ly when I ken, I ken tell you. In one way, of course, I like havin' plenty 'n' t' spare o' th' wherewithal, 'n' am thankful t' a almighty 'n' divine Proverdince what hez give it t' me richly t' enj'y, 'n' added no sorrow with it, so t' speak. Without you choose t' ceount in that light the desease o' my sainted pardner, which was, after all 's said 'n' done, only in the course o' nater, he bein' consid'able my seniority in 'ears, 'n' pulmenerry with rhewmatism 'n' fatty regeneration o' the heart an' th' liver, for a term o' years."

Richard made a pencilled note on the margin of his "Herald." Good things were likely to be too plentiful to be entrusted to memory.

"This is delicious!" he chuckled to himself while

writing. "I never saw her in better case and imagination."

"Jordan 'n' Marsh's for me, every time, the world over!" she was going on when the pencil stopped. "Prices 'n' variety 'n' styles is all precisely to my likin'. You wouldn't b'lieve what I give for a genuwine Alasker sealskin for F'delia,—real fine fur, too, 'n' trimmed with *nottar;* 'n' 'changed if 't don't fit, expressage paid one way. *That* I al'ays look out for! Two hund'ed 'n' twenty-five dollars! You've stayed 'way longer 'n' you 'spected to when you left home—ain't you?"

"Unfortunately—yes! I had to go as far as Portland, then to Albany, and back again to Boston, dancing attendance upon courts and clients. I left Freehold ten days ago."

"Heard from any your folks since you come away?"

An amused half-smile curled the blonde moustache.

"Oh, yes! My wife and I belong to the old-fashioned school of sweethearts. We write to one another every day when we are separated. Isn't that pretty well done for people who will celebrate their silver wedding-day in four years?"

The lift of the widow's nose and chin were indescribable.

"Humph!" she said, with volumes in the monosyllabled interjection.

Richard's sweet nature let him descry nothing but cause for fun in her behavior. She was to him a neighborhood comic almanac, a perpetual calendar of absurdities. He liked to draw her out and on.

"For shame, Mrs. Fitchett! I hadn't expected a sneer at wedded happiness from *you!* What would certain hopeful Freehold admirers say if I were to report you? It is lucky I am not an enterprising widower with designs and expectations. I should be crushed!"

She disdained the bait.

"I'll lay a pretty penny your every-day missiles 'n' billydoozes ain't give you all the home-'n'-town news," she said significantly. "There's been queer things a-meanderin' 'n' maraudin' through Freehold 'n' its percincts latily."

Recollecting the story of the despised bouquet, narrated in full by his wife's able pen, he was at no loss as to the direction of the fling, but his open face was the picture of honest inquiry. Here, he meditated, might be a golden opportunity for the mediation he projected, pursuant to his wife's suggestion. He would do his friends the Lees a good turn, and heal an ugly breach in church and town, if successful.

"Such as what?" he asked. "Nothing unpleasant, I trust?"

"That's 'cordin' as folks is inclined to take it. First-off—I've moved my church c'nection from th' Ole North Hill t' th' Wes' Side! Lef' th' meetin'-house 'n' parish! Sole the pew what's been 'n th' Fitchett 'n' Boggs fam'lies for nigh 'pon forty year!" triumphantly malicious.

"I am extremely sorry to hear it!" said Richard, in sincere gravity. Less truthfully, he subjoined—"particularly as Mrs. Phelps and I have just con-

cluded that we will be happier and more at home in Mr. Lee's church than where we are."

"Don't you do it!" remonstrated the widow vehemently. "If your head's level 'n' your heart in th' right place, you'll think twice befo' you bring yourself 'n' children und' th' inflooence o' that hypercritical wolf 'n sheep's clothes, 'n' that still more hypercriticaller woman, his wife. From th' beginnin' of his ministry 'mongst us, I've been sayin' inter season 'n' outer season, that they was in us, but not *of* us, neither never would or could they be. What I've bore 'n' forgive, yet kep' on hopin' agin' hope, ain't to be tole here nor now. I've trusted 'n' prayed—though agin' Scripter and common-sense, that the tiger might shed his skin 'n' the European his spots, an' here's what's come o' sech onnatral doin's."

Richard lowered his eyelids to hide the glee that was fairly on tiptoe within him; compressed his mouth to keep the rebellious moustache-ends still, while he scribbled, it would seem desultorily, on his folded paper. If Madeline were only within earshot! He despaired of doing the subject justice, even with the help of his notes.

The Fitchett was mounted squarely and heavily on her high horse. The story, rolled like an unctuous morsel under her bitter tongue for so many days, was to be rehearsed to an ignorant and sympathetic listener.

"I ain't got one soliterry item for t' reproach myself with, Richard Phelps! not in a singular, individooal nor identickle perticoolar, hev I occasion for repentence. 'S I said to Mrs. Tom Johnston las' Sun-

day night, when she 'n' a couple more o' my lady frien's 'n' their husban's come in after evenin' service, (not hevin' seen me out all day at church) to labor with me on the subjeck, 'n' findin' me—all five o' 'em, jes' 's firm 's addermint—Sez I: 'Mrs. Johnston,' sez I—'If the Jedge was to summons me to-night t' answer f' th' deeds done t' my minister's body,' sez I—'I ain't a mite afraid but that He'd say by me ez He did by th' Good Samaritan woman, "She hez done what she could!"'"

She wiped the bovine eyes in whose murky depths ugly coals were beginning to burn, and made an effort to be moderate.

"But I'm goin' on ahead of my narratative! An' after all, maybe you don't care to hear the rights o' th' story?"

"Indeed I do! Whatever concerns you interests me. And all this grieves me so deeply that I am anxious to hear the whole, to see if I may not be of some service to you."

She gave the history of the tea-party, omitting no detail of the pains she had taken to please and honor the pastor and his helpmeet; the presentation of the flowers was depicted with the adjunctive particulars the tale had gathered to itself by many repetitions. The incident of F'delia's accidental espial from the street of what looked like the bunch of buds and blooms her too-confiding mother had taken, first from her garden, then from her table, and given away overnight, accounted for the re-possession of the same, and the revelation of the frozen-viperish perfidy of those who had so lately partaken of bite and sup over

her mahogany "extension." "That young Lee" had tried to draw the fire of righteous indignation by offering to take his Bible-oath that his sister-in-law had given him the flowers to carry, on meeting him near Mr. Phelps's gate, and that he had thoughtlessly thrown them away without her consent, supposing them to be withered.

"As if any fool, with half an eye in his head, couldn't see that this is a put-up job!" commented the injured party; "a story cut 'n' carved 'n' cooked t' suit th' occasion, 'n', t' my taste, consider'ble overdone 'n' not too sweet!"

Richard hearkened with surprising patience, when one reflects that the leading points of the narrative were not new to him, and that the tone of the speaker and the pettiness and vulgarity of the tea-pot tempest were repulsive to his taste. At this juncture he interposed. He was really fond of Hollis Lee, and for his sake wished to serve his relatives, to whom he silently gave credit for discretion in not having, under pressure, revealed the circumstances of their visit to his house on their way home. He had a nervous horror of altercation and neighborhood squabbles. Thus far the Lees had, very properly, not allowed him to be embroiled with them.

"Excuse me, my dear friend!" he said; "but Mr. Hollis Lee called upon me that evening to complete the details of our new partnership, and in leaving mentioned that he should probably join his brother and sister on the way home, they having accepted your hospitality. That is a bit of corroborative evidence to the truth of his story."

She cut the well-designed phrase short, savagely.

"He didn't think to 'mention' that he was invited, too, an' couldn't come on account o' hevin' an engagement to supper somewheres else—did he? *That* was trumped-up t' order, too, 't seems, if he was only a-callin' to your house on business! He's no better 'n the rest of 'em. The quicker Freehold's shet o' th' lot, the better for us!"

Richard was a tolerable judge of human nature, and usually happy in his choice of policy in dealing with knotty specimens. He made the mistake now of assuming that the angry woman would like to be conciliated; that if her grievance could be lessened in her own sight she would return to a more Christian frame of mind. Whereas, a broad, safe principle in such cases is that he who adds fuel to the wrath of the wrathful in the shape of billets of further information in kind, or faggots of approbation, well-resined with indignant sympathy,—who would be surprised were the plaintiff's condition of mind other than it is, or his fury less fiery,—is rated as the irate man's best friend. The widow's injury was her bantling,—bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh. The attempt to believe it, or coax it away from her embrace, was an affront that aroused a brute ferocity within the maternal bosom.

"You must let me defend my young friend and partner," Mr. Phelps pursued, falling unconsciously into the persuasive "jury droop." He looked debonair, elegant, and winning. Fellow-passengers marvelled at seeing him in confidential conclave with a blatant, tawdry woman. "Being young, he is, as he

confesses, thoughtless. It is not so long since you were a girl yourself, (a pretty one, too, let me observe in passing !) that you cannot sympathize with youth. Hollis is incapable of deliberate falsehood, or of impertinence toward one whom he respects so highly as he does yourself. He probably did not ask who gave Mrs. Lee the flowers, and she did not miss them until she reached home. I am a lawyer, you know, and used to weighing evidence. The first step toward proving a crime is to find a motive."

"I aint such a goose ez not to know that ! A *corpuscle delicty*—you call it !"

"Exactly !" with admirable gravity. "So good a judge of mankind and of law as yourself understands that people don't sin for the mere love of sinning. What conceivable reason could the Lees have for offending you, their most influential parishioner? They have received nothing but favors at your hands. They have everything to hope for from a continuance of your friendship,—everything to dread from your displeasure."

"They'd oughter thought o' that before this time o' day !"

Misreading the gleam of gratified malevolence in her visage for softening, he pushed his plea homeward :

"They, have thought of it, and supposed that they were acting judiciously. We must not confound errors of judgment and taste with ill-nature and ingratitude. Come, my old schoolmate ! put the case in my hands, and let me earn the blessing of the peacemaker. I shall ask no fee except the pleasure of seeing you

again on friendly terms with our excellent pastor, who must have suffered far more from this unfortunate misunderstanding than you ever could. He has had a severe but useful lesson, rather disproportionate to his offence, let us admit. Whatever his wife and brother may have done, he seems to be guiltless. Don't you recollect telling me how much more desirable he was, as man and preacher, than the West Side pastor? Stand by your testimony and forgive and forget! Quarrels are such wretched things! especially in families and churches. I cannot speak from experience, being a man of peace, who would submit to much before he would get into a row—"

The widow untied her bonnet-strings.

"Look out!" said a wicked boy at my ear at a camp-meeting years ago, before "shouting" went out of vogue. "Miss Jenny Clemm is pulling off her gloves! She used to beat out a new pair, every meeting. Now she rolls them up and puts them in her pocket before she lets fly the first 'Glory, hallelujah!' She's a rouser, when she gets all steam on!"

The bonnet-strings clogged the turgid veins in the relict's short neck, but there was no knowing urchin to bid her companion "look out!" when she undid them. The glower of the bloodshot eyes, the flattening and lowering of the scalp above them, affected the amazed beholder as if an adder, with swollen head and hissing tongue, had sprung at him from a harmless-looking tuft of herbage.

"It's the opinion o' some o' your friends that you'd be more of a man if you did pick a quarrel now 'n' then! Or, at least, take up one as is throwed at you!

Gospel-meekness is all very fine 'n' *megocious*, 'n' 's a nice thing for to orate upon to other folks 's as has 's much religion 's you, maybe, but there's circumstances when a man gits to be more respected 'f he shows a *leettle* o' the sperrit *of* a man, 'n' a husban'! 'Taint none o' my business, you may think, 'n' I ain't so liable to offerin' my jedgment, 'thout it's bein' asked, 's some folks 's I c'd name—but 's long's frien'ly 'n' pious advice *is* a-goin' roun', I thought I might 's well hand you a mouthful!"

Richard's stare was unfeigned wonderment. Had the woman gone suddenly crazy? He lay back in his chair and stroked his moustache, dubious whether to be vexed or amused.

"I beg your pardon!" the temperate, refined intonations contrasting strikingly with her thick, heated articulation. "I do not understand you. I have not meant to be officious or dictatorial. In what have I been deficient in spirit? and when? You deal in riddles."

Mrs. Fitchett's upper eye-teeth were somewhat prominent. They protruded now in a disagreeable grin.

"'S if you cared t' know. You're no fool! Though it's pror'ble the smart woman what hez pulled the wool over your eyes for one-'n'-twenty year may set you down 's one. Smart! well, I *guess!* Freehold ain't never see the beat of her! I hope t' the Lord 't never will. One o' her kind 's enough for one kermunity. Time was, 'n' for quite a spell, when folks tried to make 'lowances for her 'n' for your blindness, considerin' what stock you came from, 'n'

you bein' easy-natered 'n' sosherbul; but the air is jes' blue with talk now, I ken tell you!"

The train halted at a station. Richard withheld a hasty retort until they were again in motion, and the clatter and rumble drowned his words for other ears.

"You cannot mean to allude to *my wife!*" he said, leaning forward. "If so—be very careful what you say."

The widow was no coward, although a native-born bully and braggart. The livid face brought near her own, the flashing blue eyes, the whitened muscles about the mouth, the sudden and spirited challenge, —were naphtha upon flame. She laughed insolently, looking right into the gleaming eyes, and snapped a pudgy thumb and finger derisively.

"*That* for her! and"—repeating the action—"*that* for her husban'! A poor, chicken-livered chap, full o' conceit 's a' negg is o' meat, 'n' too busy makin' up other folkses' quarrels t' interfere when another man makes love t' his wife under his very nose! Smart! she's so much smarter 'n you that she actially used her best friend (that's what she called her t' other 'n' decenter people!) 's a blind f' her carryin's-on with that stuck-up pup of a Rex Lupton, 'n' you never guessed what she was at. Everybody else saw it, though, you may depen'."

"Mrs. Fitchett," resolutely and haughtily, "we will have no more of this, if you please! You are too much excited to know what you are saying. When you are calmer, I shall demand an explanation."

"Deman'! I like that." At the harsh shriek of laughter a dozen people turned their heads toward

the ill-matched couple. "I'll give it t' you now, whether you'll let or leave it. 'F you'd 'a' heard th' talk as went on over my supper-table the night I was a-tellin' you 'bout jes' now,—even your sainted Lees a-takin' a han' at it,—you might hev a little o' the stiffness taken out o' you, 'n' be a mite less forrard in offerin' profeshonul advice, free graytus 'n' fur nothin', to peaceable, respectable widder-women. There ain't a man what teches his hat t' Mr. Richard Phelps, *Es*quire, 's he struts 'long the streets o' the town he was born in, 'n' his fine-lady-wife is been a natyve of, f', maybe, two years 'n' all,—but knows more how matters is run up 'n' the big house 'n' the hill with all the furren gimcracks in it, nor Richard Phelps himself dooz. *She*'s a pretty one to interdooce city-ways, 'n' late dinners, 'n' piazzer-teas, 'n' Turks' coffee, 'n' the Ole Harry knows what-all besides, in a clean-moralled town—she is!"

"*Will* you be quiet?" half frantic, as other passengers seemed, to his excited fancy, to bend in their direction as if to catch a word here and there.

"Well, I *won't*,—till I've said my say! 'N' I don't ask you t' take hearsay evidence, neither. That's legalized talk,—ain't it?" with a broader and eviller grin. "The very evenin' o' the day you lef' home,—not two hours after I'd seen you a-scramblin', like a monkey, up a bank for to git some rubbishy wild truck for her,—I went over to see her on this very identickle business you are s' erfficious about. 'For,' says I to myself, 'she may know somethin' o' the way that bookay got inter that evergreen-tree, same's if it had 'a' growed there, 'n' I'll give them Lee-folks the

credit o' the doubts,' says I, 'the gretest of 'em bein' charity 'n' men's words,—not t' say women's, a soundin' brass 'n' a tinklin' cymblin!' says I, 's I went up the hill 'thout waitin' to take my bonnet off after my ride with Mrs. Tom Johnston, who was all for me not asking *her* one livin' question about it. 'N' me, with good-will 'n' peace on earth a-bubblin' over th' sides o' my soul, 's you might say, 'n' comin', quiet-like, bein' a light-stepper al'ays, f' one o' my weight,—on to th' porch o' your house, what sh'd I see but *him* on his bent knees to her 'n' the parlor, through the winder,—f' all the world like a chromio out of a tea-store! An' while I stood there, fairly takin' root inter the floor, bein' that horrified-like—I behelt with these very eyes, her a-put her two arms 'roun' his neck, 'n' kiss him, 'n' they two all alone 'n' the parler, close by the pianner—'s help me, GOD!"

"I do not believe one word of it!" came low and roughly from the lips of the man opposite her.

His face was gray as ashes. The blue eyes, usually so warm and lucent, were as opaque as lead. Had the virago ever heard the saying, "Beware the wrath of a patient man!" she must have recalled it, and quailed.

"Not one syllable of the foul story!" he repeated, the dogged, desperate set of his chin and jaw more emphatic than the outrageous rudeness of the words. "As you are a woman, I can only thrust the lie back upon you, and warn you that if I ever hear of your repeating it, I will prosecute you for slander to the fullest extent of the law. I hereby forbid you ever to take my wife's name upon your lips again in any

connection whatever, and decline to continue the conversation now, or at any time."

She arrested his motion to rise by clapping him on the knee and bending toward him, the ugly sneer yet on her mouth.

"You needn't make a time here, 'n' set everybody to starin' 'n' talkin' in a public car! I say! there's a' easy way to settle the question. Ask madam when you get home if I have tole the truth, or a lie. I ain't accustom' to bein' give the lie direc' 'n' p'int-blank. Put your macherlet wife onter the witness-stan', an' call me in t' hear her evidence. I ain't skeered as t' what she'll say. Ask her, agin, 'bout the walks 'n' talks on th' piazza 'n' the moonlight since you've been away, 'n', goin' back farther yet, who rid up-street with her the day you 'n' her bosom-frien', what never come home alive, went off together t' Alb'ny. You might a' traded off, all 'round, if you'd a' knowd how th' lan' lay behind you."

He shook off the loathly touch, whirled his chair about, sat down with his back to her, and vouchsafed not another glance or word for the rest of the journey.

Overmastering anger against the creature, coarse-grained and bed-tempered, who had dared traduce his wife, ruled his thoughts for the first silent half-hour. He discredited the tale wholly. Imagination summoned to face the lurid-eyed, vulgar-tongued termagant the mute visage of the pure, noble mother of his children, refined in every instinct and motion, chaste of impulse, elevated of thought; the woman who had not hid a sentiment or action from him in over a score of years, and in all that time had never

come short of his expectations! He ground his teeth in impotence of regret that her accuser was not another man that he might choke him with the vile falsehood.

Once he had nearly put out his arms before he was conscious of the action,—so real did his wife's presence seem to him, and his lips stirred with her name.

"Madeline! *Madeline!* Great heavens! do not *I* know what a devilish slander this is! You never had a thought of love for any other man than myself. As for that shy, hulking boy—"

He did not put the next thought into words even to himself, but clenched fist and jaws were not indices of abatement of fury. Working, rather than settling, down into calmness, in the next hour, he arrived at a definite conclusion. He would not insult his wife by retailing the unclean trash the *Thing* behind him had told him. But he had never liked Rex Lupton, and he knew that Madeline, at heart, held him in affectionate esteem. On this variation of tastes they had generally preserved a discreet silence. She met his infrequent slurs upon the young mill-owner with tranquillity, and never praised him in words. As a rule, he respected her fancies, indulged her prejudices whenever he divined them, and since it pleased her to dignify into a hero the most commonplace man he knew, and in some respects the most obnoxious, he refrained from criticising Rex in her hearing, and treated him with marked—if soulless—courtesy whenever he was obliged to meet the son of his old friend.

Richard Phelps was as thin-skinned as a blooded

horse where his personal popularity was involved. He chafed and writhed in torture under the thought that, in the community where he believed himself to be everybody's favorite and pride, he was pitied and mocked behind his back. The picture of his self-complacent progress through the streets, wrapped snugly in the consciousness that an atmosphere of affectionate appreciation enveloped him, as the breezes from his native hills,—had been sketched in few, but broad dashes of the widow's charcoal. In reviewing his life of the past three months, his vanity was rubbed raw by this new adjustment of relative positions. He saw the covert sneer, heard the hiss of scorn, the sly laugh when he had passed, the compassionate patronage of the "poor fellow in whom there was no harm," that galled most cruelly of all.

What had this whelp done to compromise the Phelps name, and draw public attention to his—Richard Phelps's—family relations? There should be an end, at once and forever, of his sentimental hanging about the premises; the unconventional dropping-in at irregular hours, the drive, walks, and rides with Salome and Paul, that had been permitted to the friend of long standing and sedate deportment. The fellow had formed the habit of coming across the lawn to spend his evenings, and the few spare afternoon hours that fell into his lot, when he was courting Marion Bayard, and now kept going through the motions through sheer want of enterprise—the long-backed fool! Had this abominable rumor, joining his name with the woman who was immeasurably his superior, ever reached his ears? If so, the husband felt that

here, at least, was something and somebody he could handle.

Had the story of the kiss in the drawing-room been as empty a fiction as that of the rest of the love-drama? the play which grinning Freehold had watched through all these years?

Lupton was thirteen years younger than Madeline. She regarded him as a lad who had once been engaged to her adopted sister. But he was mature for his age, and nothing of a "ladies' man." Marion's mocking assertion that he was born a hundred years old recurred to the thinker here, and Mrs. Phelps's steadfast advocacy of the reserved suitor. Also, that he had flung out petutantly at the girl, one day, that her friend had done most of the wooing. She had answered with temper, and dealt him a sarcastic cut he could not recollect at this lapse of time without wincing.

But this malicious babble of Lupton's philandering with Richard Phelps's wife must be stopped immediately. Madeline ought to be chary of sisterly caresses to the presumptuous muff. It was unlike her matronly dignity to grant such to any man beside himself and Paul. Perhaps the sad-eyed fellow had carried to her some pitiful story, and whined on his knee for consolation—which she gave, for Marion's sake. He would not entertain for a second the proposition that he should confront the innocent, high-minded woman with her slanderer—yet the latter must have felt pretty sure of her footing to dare make the offer of the test.

So immersed was he in sombre reverie that he did

not observe the slackening pace of the train; remained motionless, until the brakeman's shout of "Freehold!" awoke him.

He waited, without quitting his place, or glancing around, until sure that Mrs. Fitchett left the car, and to avoid the possible risk of encountering her on the platform, loitered in alighting. He was the last traveler to step from the train, and the whistle and bell of the engine signalled his danger as he swung himself off. The first person he saw was his wife, anxiously scanning the moving cars, a shadow of disappointment beginning to settle upon her with the almost certainty that he was not there. She stood near the track, a little in advance of the moving throng of arriving passengers and bustling employés; the electric light blazed over her, showing every lineament of the serious face, the stately, unconscious pose of her figure.

"Wives who have love-passages with other men do not watch for their husbands *so!*"

He hated himself for the hurrying thought, as he almost caught her in his arms in the sight of porters, hackmen, and loiterers.

"My love! my dear love!" he murmured, in a passion of penitence, his countenance irradiated with the rapture of return. "I have been away so long!" he added, semi-apologetically. "It seems more like ten years than ten days! And this day's journey was interminable!"

She had driven down for him in the covered carriage, for a fine, close rain was thickening into a storm with the evening's premonition of autumnal chill. Whatever might be the weather, she invariably

met him at the station in person on his return from journeys short or long. She was looking well and bright, he saw, at once, with a throb of gratification and relief—much better than when he went away. The coachman touched his hat and smiled, well-pleased at his master's greeting. The gleam of the station-lamps struck on the trappings of the harness and lighted up the interior of the luxurious vehicle. The dampened plumes of his self-satisfaction arose with the tangible evidences of his personal consequence and the value of his belongings. He put his wife into the carriage, and leaped in after her, shutting out the view of uncomfortable pedestrians and sidewalks slippery with black mud. Richard was himself again.

Salome was well and expecting him eagerly, he learned from his wife's talk, and there had arrived that day, a cheerful letter from Paul. Hollis Lee was in that afternoon to report all right at the office. Nothing had occurred of general interest in the town.

"If I except the Lee-Fitchett imbroglio," she amended the last statement. "I saw her get off the train, but she cut me dead, absolutely drawing her skirts closer as she passed me with a melo-dramatic "Holier-than-thou" gesture, that was very funny. I suppose she cannot forgive me for the complicity of the Norway fir *in re* bookay and pastoress. Did you speak to her on the journey? She was sure to introduce the subject if she had your ear for ten seconds. Poor woman! Can you conceive of a littleness of soul that can revel in such pettiness of spite?"

"We had a brief talk. Then I got out of the way.

She is a violent, vulgar, venomous virago!" turning to look out of the window streaming with rain, and striving to speak jocularly. "With which alliterative anathema we will dismiss her for more agreeable topics!"

The home-coming was very sweet to the nerve-tired man. His bath was ready, warmed to the precise temperature he liked; clean clothing laid out in the dressing-room; mother and daughter had dressed with direct reference to his taste; the dinner was exquisite, and a thought of him had gone into soup, *entrées* and dessert. A gala-air pervaded the house,—a breath of welcome met him at the door, a smile of greeting lingered in every room. The reunion was a poem that fulfilled every longing.

He was trying to express his appreciation of this in the library after dinner, while sipping the coffee his wife had made, and smoking the cigar Salome had lighted.

"It is not often that the weary wanderer's welcome is 'round and perfect as a star,'" he said, in mock-heroic strain, made earnest by the ring of his tone and happy face. "What is it, James?"

"A note, suh!" apologized that functionary, bowingly.

Richard took it—a dainty, scented envelope with nibbled edges, that should have been handed on a velvet cushion, instead of a silver waiter—and read it, his cigar between his teeth—then passed it to his wife.

"It is headed, "*Confidential*," she objected, glancing at the caption.

"Pshaw! that is one of the fair Isabel's sensational

touches. The confidence is probably nothing more startling than Gerald's latest fracas with his tutor. I wish that brother of his would stoop to sublunary matters long enough to administer a sound drubbing to the jackanapes. He is dying for the want of it, as Mrs. Lupton would see quickly enough were he another woman's son."

"O papa!" cried Salome, with a hurt look hardly justified by her interest in the spoiled lad. "You never flogged Paul."

"There are boys and boys, my dear! Or, to speak more accurately, boys and cubs. Ought I to go, Madeline? Mightn't I send an apology and a promise to look in to-morrow morning? I am very tired. The trip has taken more out of me than I was aware of until I put into harbor. And I am so divinely comfortable that to stir from my "ain ingle-side" seems like a sin."

She looked up thoughtfully from the summons, which was in these words:

"DEAR MR. PHELPS:

"Rex went to New York this afternoon and I may not expect him back for three days. So, in a business emergency that has arisen, I have no trustworthy adviser except yourself. I regret that the aforesaid need has fallen upon your precious first evening at home, but I promise Mrs. Phelps that I will not detain you longer than necessary. Half an hour—or less—should settle the whole affair. Ask her to forgive

"Yours (and hers) truly,

"ISABEL LEMOINE LUPTON."

"I do not see how you can refuse such a reasonable request. Mrs. Lupton is not one to make needless demands upon her friends, and she promises not to keep you late. I am sorry the weather is so disagreeable. Won't you wear your overcoat? The air is raw."

"Not for so short a run."

He had been into the hall and returned to the room, hat and umbrella in hand, manifestly reluctant to leave home. With true Southern love for a blazing hearthstone, Mrs. Phelps had ordered a wood-fire to be kindled in the library, and Salome had fed it, when made, with a choice store of resinous cones, from a great basketful which she and Rex had gathered in the piney cathedral and brought home in the phaeton the preceding day. The room was fragrant with their burning; a lamp with a rose-tinted shade joined its warm glow to their flare; the silver service and translucent china sparkled with ruddy lights.

Salome stood at the corner of the hearth, leaning against the mantel. Her smile was a thought pensive, but her look was bent affectionately upon him. His wife lifted her lips for the kiss he bowed to give; her fine, sweet face distinct and clear as a cameo in the falling light of the chandelier .Her gown was of the creamy woollen fabric before described as her usual home-wear, because he had a fancy for the soft, large folds and subdued whiteness. A deep-hearted Maréchal Niel rose was on her bosom. He inhaled the perfume as he stooped over her. The arm-chair of wine-colored velvet framed the picture, each har-

monious detail of which he rehearsed to himself in passing along the gravel walks and through the dripping hedge.

"What a rank idiot I was to let that infamous tirade cling to my mind for one minute!" he reflected, shutting up his umbrella in the shelter of the Lupton porch before rang the bell. "By George! that fiery-faced scandal-monger ought to flogged through the town at the cart's tail for daring to take *her* name upon her blistering tongue!"

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. LUPTON awaited her visitor in her library. It was a smaller apartment than the back parlor, from which it was to-night divided by a closed portière of amber plush, "powdered" with purple clematis. She, too, had her open fireplace—a grate filled with ignited cannel coal. Her robe, which would now be called a "tea-gown," was silver-gray silk, trimmed with black lace. It trained at the back in a Watteau fold, and flowed loose in front from neck to feet, yet defined, in some mysterious way, the pliant slenderness of the form it feigned to hide. In a tiny vase on the stand nearest her amber satin chair were a few stars of white jasmine, and a sprig of citron-aloes. A screen of leaf-brown satin, with silver swallows sailing across it, was at the lady's right hand, to break the draught from an oriel-window.

Richard's quick eye took in each feature of the artistic interior; his smile expressed pleasure in the dramatic setting in which the central figure chose to appear.

"As stage-dressing—inimitable!" was his thought. "All the same, it *is* a stage!"

It was nevertheless flattering to a man of his temperament to reflect that she had dressed herself and her platform for him alone, the appointment of the interview establishing the fact beyond cavil. He

liked to be made much of—best of all, when the spoiler—or devotee—was a woman, and attractive to the æsthetic eye. He uttered a graceful thing or two, complimentary of the scene as contrasted with the rainy darkness he had left, in accepting the chair to which she pointed. It faced her, and cast up her neck and bust effectively against the screen,—a circumstance he was not slow to perceive.

"We will not waste our little half-hour in pretty speeches," she said, the mellow, *trainante* accents robbing the remark of brusqueness, but not of directness. "Have you been told at home of the provisional engagement of marriage between your daughter and my step-son?"

"*What!*" He was on his feet as if struck by a bullet.

"Be seated—please! We have no time for heroics—paternal, or step-maternal. The provisional betrothal is ten days old. I do not think the parties waited for your going before entering into the contract. Their delay in announcing the betrothal is undoubtedly the result of proper reluctance to speak of it before they have received your sanction. My step-son's only religion is belief in the Gospel of Conventionality. I sent for you to say that the marriage would be such a decided inconvenience to me that it must not take place. I depend upon you to forbid the banns.

"You have not recovered your breath, yet, I see," the slow, fluent enunciation dropping the words into his ears. "Of course, your second thought—when you find your thoughts—will be to consult your wife.

However distasteful the alliance may be to you personally—and it cannot be anything else—you will refer the final decision to her, when you have fumed your fill. Now this is just what you must not do. To save time and trouble, I will tell you that the match is—if not of her making—entirely agreeable to her. In fact, I more than surmise that she is piously grateful for the chance of making restitution in some sort to the bereaved swain for the unkind turn done him by Providence so long ago that anybody but a springless machine would have forgiven and forgotten it by now.

"Let that pass. Here stands our case: Rex Lupton, as my children's guardian and their father's executor, cannot do justice to his charge if he has a family of his own. I mean to keep this house, and maintain a certain decent state in the world. Rex, celibate, and, if possible, empty-hearted, is a means to that end. I have showed you my hand. The exigency admits of no fencing with truth. You have a dutiful daughter, and a super-dutiful wife. I count upon your influence with both."

She had given him a minute too long for reflection; time for the first fierce burst of indignant astonishment to recede, and emotion, upon which she had not reckoned, to assert itself. He disliked Rex Lupton, but unexpected relief succeeded upon the revolt of heart and prejudice against the suggested union. He loved his only daughter fondly, but somewhat less than he did the wife who had become a necessity of his existence by reason of his absolute dependence upon her during his invalidism,—and many degrees

less that he loved Richard Phelps. The publication of this engagement would stamp the lie upon the scurrilous reports retailed by the Fitchett. His wife's fame would be vindicated ; himself be no longer the song of the drunkard in the pot-houses of his native town, nor the pity of the pious. The caress that other widow may have seen was such as a mother might bestow upon a son. In the reaction that showed him how heavily the knowledge of the bruited scandal had weighed upon him, he took offence at the calm imperiousness that dealt with him and his household as with marionnettes. "You must," "you shall," "I will have it so!" were novel terms when applied to himself. What warrant had what he mentally styled "this uncommonly cool hand" to dispose his private affairs as she willed, whether his inclination jumped with hers or not? His daughter's choice was highly objectionable to him. That was incontestable. He was by no means sure that he would *not* "forbid the banns," but he had played the master too long and loftily to be dictated to by anybody, were she Fitchett or Lupton.

"Your communication has taken me by surprise," he said tranquilly. "My wife no doubt forecast it when she told me this evening that she wished to have a long talk with me when I came back. She had not time before your message was brought in. As you anticipate, I shall depend much upon her judgment in forming a decision. To be frank, I like the look of the thing, at the first flush, as little as you do. You have spoken so openly thatI may venture to be yet more frank, and admit that I neither like nor admire your

correctly estimable step-son, and think my girl might do much better in the matrimonial market. Having exchanged confidences thus far, and amicably, we will postpone further discussion until I have heard what Mrs. Phelps has to say."

"By no means. You will pledge me your support here and now, give me a definite, solemn promise to oppose this match by every means at your command. Briefly and explicitly, *I will not have it!* I am not talking for effect"—as he gazed at her in incredulous amazement. "If I had not been also, 'taken by surprise' by the engagement, having stultified myself by following another trail, I could have managed without your coöperation. I am confidently of the same mind with the man who said—'Time and I against any other two!' You are Time's unworthy substitute,—he not being available."

Vexed though he was, he saw the ridiculous element in her usurpation of despotic rule, and the serene assurance with which she relied upon a free and independent man of station and family to do her behest. He had credited her with more sense than to take his innocuous gallantries *au grand sérieux*. But every woman has her weak side. This jolly little fascinator presumed upon her influence over her admirers. He would let her down gently but decidedly.

"My dear Mrs. Lupton," he said politely and smilingly; "we may as well understand one another in this matter before more is said. Should my wife see reason to permit this engagement—"

"Provisional!" she interpolated mildly.

He bowed.

"This engagement, provisional upon my consent—it would be a reflection upon her were I to promise you, 'here and now,' never to sanction it. Again, Salome is not a child. She will be twenty-one next May, and able to marry without my approbation of her choice. I appreciate your position, and earnestly desire to coöperate with you. But I cannot forfeit my child's confidence and affection, or kick her suitor—a man of good family and fortune and irreproachable morals—out of my house because I happen not to like him. If I should forbid his visits, and command Salome to give him up, and she were to rebel—as a girl with mind and affections of her own is likely to do—how would I have bettered you by alienating her and wounding my wife?"

"In that event, I should be justified in my eyes, if not in yours, in playing my last card. I should regret the *esclandre*, but self-preservation would demand heroic measures."

"You have still another card, then?"

He said it in amused curiosity, eyeing her coolly and critically, as she arose deliberately from her chair with an almost absurd solemnity of motion and visage, and rested one slender hand on the leaf-brown screen at her right. She was a born sensationalist, but she overrated her dramatic ability. This was cheap work.

"Is it consistent with the unities of your plot, to give me an inkling of what that card is?" he asked, not without a glimmer of mirthful contempt at the combination of stage-effects and evident earnestness of purpose.

"It is here!"

A slight push rolled the screen aside. It had concealed the tabernacled portrait Salome had seen upstairs. The leaves were open ; the angle of observation and the fall of the light had been cleverly calculated from where he sat. The illusion was so nearly perfect that the living woman seemed to confront him. Involuntarily he passed his hand across his eyes ; for one blind second the roaring of waves filled his ears, the floor rocked under his feet ; voice and breath forsook him. He had never heard that such a portrait was in Rex Lupton's possession, and the exhibition had the effect of a wraith. Expert in cunning devices, Mrs. Lupton had draped easel and frame with some dull-hued Oriental fabric. The beautiful head leaned toward the spectator from the shadow of a slightly-projecting hood with which the painted background was artistically blended.

It is only on the hired stage that men's knees smite together for a longer instant than is required for the rally of conventional look and ward. The show-woman was quite certain of blench and quiver. The ordinary observer would have noticed only a start of surprise, then the sweep of the hand over the face to steady the vision. After that, a man of courtly presence, rising to his feet, because his hostess remained standing, and fixing inquiring eyes on her countenance while his fingers tugged mechanically at his moustache.

"Ah ! an excellent likeness ! " he said hesitatingly, apparently because he could not think what else was expected of him. "But I fail to see the connection—"

"With my final play ? Sit down, I beg ! " resum-

ing her seat, and, as if idly, picking up an envelope from the table at her left, turning it abstractedly over in her hand, and pinching the corners hard with thumb and forefinger while she talked. "While you look at the picture—it is by C——, and a remarkably fine painting—let me recall to your mind a question I put to you, a fortnight or so ago, relative to a mysterious lover of Miss Bayard with whom she was in correspondence at the time of her death. I had then in my desk the documents in the case, and needed no information from you, but I threw out the query as a 'feeler,' you understand. That was impertinent jesting. To-night I am in deadly earnest. This—" holding it up suddenly— "is a letter I took from the pocket of the original of that picture after her death. It is too long and wordy to be read in full, and Mrs. Phelps may be impatient if we exceed the half-hour. She was then much engrossed with you, whose decease was hourly expected, and arrangements for the obsequies, disposition of effects, etc., devolved upon my husband and myself. The gown worn by the fatally injured traveller was partly burned. Before throwing it away, I emptied the pocket of a handkerchief and a letter or two. The envelope containing this was not addressed. It was my duty to open and read it."

She spoke with frightful deliberation, putting needless comma-pauses between some words. Her voice was cold and softly rounded, like snow that suffocates and freezes. The red-hazel eyes were merciless.

"It is a love-letter, but Rex Lupton never wrote it, or one like it. The author's aim throughout six pages is to prove to the girl he loves against his will, and

who returns his passion against her will—and conscience—that there is no sin in what is altogether involuntary. That his heart is large enough to hold two of even such incomparable women as his wife and herself. The argument is lawyerly and eloquent. He reminds her how long and silently he has struggled to repress his affection, how faithful and tender he is to his noble wife whose devotion to them both has drawn them nearer together day by day, 'as with closing links of steel.' (A verbatim quotation!) How steadfastly he kept back the confession of his love, even feigning to others, and trying to believe himself, that he disliked her. How the betrothal had awakened him with a shock that showed him 'the sweet and terrible truth.' (Another literal quotation!)

"I gather from other allusions that she had blinded him so effectually as to the state of her affections that he had not divined this until on the afternoon of a certain horseback ride, when by accident, the carefully veiled secret became mutually manifest. I gather, furthermore, that the woman fought hard to keep her married lover at a distance, more because she loved and was indebted to his wife than from moral scruples.

"I will read one passage:

"'My darling! you have studied my character to little purpose if you imagine that even for your dear sake, I would pain or wrong her to whom I have vowed constancy and love for a lifetime. Hers must ever be the chief chamber of my heart. It is her right, by every law human and divine. But, sweet one, a man's is a dual nature, more complex than woman's. Until I knew you, the deeps of mine had

not been sounded. Your companionship brought a fullness of satisfaction, as the knowledge that you love me has brought a glory into my life unknown before. I need you, and you need me. Heaven has made us as we are. It is folly to fight against destiny. By the love we bear one another, by our faith in and hope of that Heaven, I entreat you not to sell yourself to a man whose narrow soul can never mate itself with yours. The imagination *maddens* me!'

"It sounds flat-small-beerish to a third person," interpolated the reader, with a scornful little laugh. "To save time and patience we will condense the rest. He goes on to propose a compromise, should she be still madly resolved on self-immolation. Let them have one blissfully-forgetful day all to themselves. If she will accept his escort on the morrow's journey, they will, until her destination is reached feel and act and talk as if they had the whole, beautiful love-full world to themselves. Will forget care, sorrow, impending parting for a few golden hours.

"Then"—he continues—"I swear solemnly to deliver you to your relatives in Albany, without a murmur, and in so doing, to have done forever with the love-words and love-looks that make you miserable. While I know that it is a perverted sense of right and honor which causes you pain and remorse where I feel none, I bow to your will. Six hours is all I claim as my very own—utterly, freely, fully mine—out of the years you will spend with another. (I could curse the cold-blooded automaton when I write the words!) "You will be as safe with me as in an angel's arms. And what is my petition when you look dispassion-

ately at it? A matter so natural and simple that Madeline would be the first to laugh at your scruples."

"Stop there!" almost shouted the baited victim in a thick, coarse voice that did not belong to him, or to any gentleman. "Why do you go on with the infernal farce? You want your price for the stolen letter. What is it?"

His face was flushed, his glance dangerous. For awhile he had listened dully, like one smitten dumb and numb with horrified amazement. Now, the savage was aroused, and meant fight.

Mrs. Lupton laughed again—the creamy gurgle of well-bred amusement.

"'Infernal' and 'stolen' are not nice words, my dear Mr. Phelps. But you are right in one thing. I have my price. The day your daughter marries Hollis Lee, or anybody else than my husband's son, I will burn this document in your sight. If you do not break off this ill-starred engagement, I shall make the whole affair so public that Rex Lupton would refuse at the very altar the daughter of the man who stole (to borrow your word) the affections of his promised bride, and would have eloped with her, had not death snatched her from his arms. Keep quiet!" authoritatively, as he started up with an oath of denial,—such fierce profanity as her delicate ear had never heard before. "I shall not detain you much longer. I am no more fond of scenes than you, and want to hurry this one over. This letter would convict you in the mind of any man or woman of common sense, of a deliberate design to run away with

that girl. Men thirty-six years old, with families of their own, do not believe in such sublimated platonics, such whipped syllabub of sentiment as this letter expresses, if it means anything else than what I have said. If I do not have your written promise by to-morrow morning that this marriage shall be prevented by fair means or foul, Mrs. Phelps shall have the story and the papers by to-morrow noon. Should the engagement hold fast in spite of your opposition,—why, much as I should dislike to break with esteemed neighbors—I shall have no alternative!

"I am not superstitious or pious—take them as synonyms, if you will—but I do believe in such Fate as warned me to keep these papers, as a hold upon Rex, should he ever be unmanageable, and a check upon your boundless, fatuous self-conceit. Then, too, I so disliked the girl that I would have struck her in her grave if she could have felt it. Altogether, something urged me to put away the letter and bide my time. It has come!"

Dumb and desperate, he made a step towards her, glaring so wolfishly at the now folded sheet in her hand that she anticipated the impulse.

"Take it, if you would like to refresh your memory!" with the same merciless laugh that had taunted him before. "This is only a copy in my handwriting. I knew you too well, *mon ami*, to trust the original within your reach. That is safe under lock and key, ready to tell the tale should you murder me in the hope of hushing up the scandal. And with it, the penciled reply from your inamorata for which you wrote you would wait in the library until midnight.

There were but three lines, and they evidently did not quite please you, for you tore and twisted them into bits, and tossed them into your waste-paper basket. "It shall be as you wish!" she said. "I go to Albany in the noon train to-morrow. GOD pity us both, and forgive us if He can!"

"She sinned with both eyes open, poor wretch! You drugged your conscience,—played the reputable sneak so effectively, even to yourself, the wonder is she did not despise you, instead of lowering her proud head to your bosom. But I do not comprehend the vagaries of passion. I fancy that Mrs. Phelps would regard the episode from my standpoint, although I sincerely trust that you will not give me a pretext for testing the justice of my conjecture. The half-hour is up!"—glancing at the clock. "You have my ultimatum. I shall expect a note from you in due legal form, to-morrow. After that, we will await the success of your machinations; keep our powder dry, and trust in your Providence and my Fate, the twin-powers that have kept your secret—with my help—for six years and more."

She arose with a little shake of her skirts that dropped them into æsthetic folds. Her mien was that of the successful tragedian called before the curtain at the end of the play. Her lips were redder than their wont; her eyes shone gloriously. To the wretched man before her, she was a beautiful devil, to whom his soul was pawned. In the abjectness of his misery, another vision arose before his sight,—the rose-pink glow of the library, with Salome standing on the hearth, watching him with trustful eyes;

the dignified sweetness of the face his wife lifted to his kiss, the noble head and form framed by the tall-backed garnet chair. He could smell the perfume of the blazing cones, hear the hiss and bubble of the silver tea-kettle.

"You will not be gone long!" The words, partly-regretful, partly re-assuring, echoed in his brain with her gentle intonations.

Had she known all, she would have bidden him go and never return. The public disgrace threatened by his inquisitor was as nothing in prospect, when set beside the lofty scorn of one pure, proud woman who loved him.

He walked blindly to the door, moving and speaking as he had sometimes dreamed of doing in troubled sleep. On the threshold he turned with a glassy stare at the lovely *châtelaine*, and the lovelier pictured countenance beyond her—the girl he had loved madly, and lost, and the love for her as well, in the weary weeks of fever and insensibility from which he had awakened with his eyes on Madeline's face. Her lip curled, her eyes were full of sad disdain, as he met them. Had she come back from the grave he had never visited, to reproach him with the wreck he had made of her young life?

"You shall have the paper in the morning!" he said, weakly, his fingers fumbling with his moustache. "I would write it to-night, but my head feels strange. I have had a trying day! a very trying day!"

In another minute, she heard the front door close behind him.

She, too, was weary, but so far content with her

evening's work that she could afford to rest. She shut the leaves of the tabernacle, locked them, and drew the screen before the window. As she did it, she smiled a little.

"I shall get up quite an affection for you, my dear Marion, if you do me a few more good turns," she murmured.

Consistent to her principle of taking nobody into confidence, she carried easel and portrait back to Rex's chamber, making two trips to do it. The tabernacle was a heavy weight for slight arms, but she had brought it down, and knew that she could manage it. On the last journey she paid her stated nightly visit to the nursery, and to Gerald's room. The younger children were sound asleep. They had her nerves and conscience, and slumbered like night-gowned cherubs.

Gerald had made no move toward retiring. His mother heard him, at her tap on the panels, push his chair back hurriedly, and entered promptly to find him tearing off his coat. A heap of school-exercises and lesson-books was on the table, and from beneath them peeped the purple cover of a flashy novel.

"My dear son!" exclaimed the dulcet voice, "do you hear the clock striking nine? You must not study so late. A brain as active as this"— stroking his forehead—"needs at least, ten hours' sleep when the owner is under twenty. Go to bed—there's a blessed boy! Good-night!"

By and by, when she was sure he would be asleep, she would steal in and purloin the bad book, and he would not dare inquire what had become of it, know-

ing who the thief must be. She believed in espionage as devoutly as did Madame Beck of the Rue Fossette in "Villette," and made surveillance do the work of maternal precepts in the management of her offspring.

After kissing her eldest hope again, and more tenderly, she glided down the staircase, humming as she moved, her "second-best favorite"—

> "O, love for a year, a week, a day!
> But, alas for the love that loves alway!"

The rain increased in weight as the evening advanced. Now and then, she raised her head from "John Inglesant," to enjoy the patter and rush of the showers that waxed into a flood. The touch of mysticism, the quaint, unworldly spirit of the seventeenth century novel, interested and soothed her. It was like a diet of wholesome brown bread and fresh butter after a surfeit of fruit-cake, for she had read a good deal of trash lately, to the detriment of her intellectual digestion.

The cannel coal puffed and sighed and flickered in the grate; the amber curtains shut her in from disrespectful draughts. Occasionally, she let her book rest on her knee, closed upon a taper finger that bore a wonderful opal defended by diamonds. Behind her, the silver-and-gray swallows sailed against the leaf-brown background that might be an oak-coppice in October. She was thinking over what she had read—and other things. Nothing, however, that clouded her passive visage, or made the great eyes anything but limpid. She enjoyed her own society too much

to be lonely in such luxurious solitude as this, and to-night she had earned her modest recreation.

Eleven silvery strokes from the mantel-clock reminded her that she was losing her beauty-sleep. Before the chime died away, the door-bell rang. The servants had locked shutters and outer doors at half-past ten, but Maggie presently ran down from the third story, and knocked at the library-door.

"Will you see anybody, mem?"

"Certainly! if it is any one who has a right to ask for me. It is probably a note or telegram."

Nothing from without could touch her very nearly, her little ones being safely folded under her roof. She hearkened, therefore, with curiosity unmixed with anxiety, as she heard a man's voice speak to the maid. The first sentence,—from the inflection, an inquiry—was muffled by the rain-fall. An exclamation followed the servant's reply.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes sir. Mrs. Lupton is by herself in the library."

"Ask if I can speak with her for a moment. Mr. Hollis Lee!"

He blinked confusedly when ushered into the lighted room, the outer darkness being dense.

"I beg your pardon for this untimely call!" with a rapid look about the apartment. "But I have been waiting for two hours at Mr. Phelps's house, to see him on important business, and Mrs. Phelps thought he might be here."

"He was, for perhaps half-an-hour. He left before nine o'clock—I supposed to go home."

Maggie, loitering in the hall with the instinct of

her class for a possible sensation, here presented herself in the library doorway, a hat in her hand.

"Please mem, Mr. Phelps's been an' gone an' forgot his hat when he went out. Leastways, here's his name in this one a-standin' on the rack. An' bless an' save us all! if here ain't his umbrella besides!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. RUFUS LEE had been very ill all that day and evening. Distress, anxiety, the wearing thought that her momentary indiscretion, magnified by her tender conscience into an ebullition of temper, might impair her husband's usefulness, and would probably compel him to seek another pastorate, handicapped by the stigma of "something wrong in his last field"—wrought upon the somewhat fragile frame until she was prostrated by nervous headache and fever.

Anna Marcy was a staff of strength in these sorrowful days at the parsonage. Helpful, sanguine, and sympathetic, she was the parents' counsellor, the children's playfellow and custodian, and Hollis's confidante. Salome complained that she saw so much less of her than she had anticipated, and had she been less compassionate for the persecuted, distraught household, would have rebelled openly against Anna's incessant preoccupation. As her friend could not come often to her, the girl, with the dangerous partisanship of youth, went daily and openly to the Lees. Flowers, fruit, books, carriage and horses were at the service of her new acquaintance. The children fell in love with her, and she gladly assisted Anna in relieving the overtaxed mother of their society and demands, whenever she could beguile them away from her.

That Mrs. Fitchett made capital of all this had not occurred to either of the friends as a possibility, until the relict stopped them one morning as they were getting into the wide, low phaeton with the two elder babies. Lunch-baskets were stowed under the seat, and their destination was a pleasant picnic ground a couple of miles out of town.

"So you two Chinamese twins is off together again'!" said the widow, with a wicked giggle. "Folks is a-talkin' consid'rable about how the elegent Miss Phelps takes Mrs. Lee's nurse-girl out a-ridin' every day. They 'spose, maybe, it's on a'count of her bein' too corpulient for t' walk fur."

The same story percolated through innumerable strata of gossip to Mr. Lee's ears, and he forbade future airings for the little ones. Stout-hearted Anna cared not a rush for ridicule and malice when she was the only target. She had cast out divers anchors to windward in the shape of letters to friends who had ecclesiastical influence, besides privately arranging with her mother for an asylum in their home for Ethel and the babies, should Rufus be driven again to candidating.

On this particular night she fed, bathed and put the children to bed, took the doctor's orders and executed them for the relief of the sick woman, and had the comfort of seeing her sink into profound slumber about eleven o'clock.

A basket of mending had been neglected during the house-mother's illness, and this her deputy abstracted and carried down to the back parlor, the living-room of the frugal household. She was sur-

prised to find Mr. Lee there. He wore a shabby dressing-gown ; his hair was rumpled by the restless fingers he had ploughed it with, while trying to study ; an open book was in his hand, but he was not reading.

"Come in !" he said, rising to place a chair for her by the centre-table and lamp. "I left my study half an hour ago, and came down to Ethel's room, but seeing you busy with her, would not disturb you. I can neither read nor write nor think to-night. There was a joint meeting of Standing and Parish Committees in the church this evening, to which I was not invited. I suppose my fate was decided by the conclave, and I half-hoped—I could not ask it—that some friend would call in to tell me what was done. I begin—Heaven help me !—to fear that an unpopular pastor has no friends outside of his own home. I have labored diligently among this people ; have stood at the bedside of their sick and dying ; have buried their dead and baptized their children. I can truly say that "in all their afflictions I was afflicted," and was a partaker in all their joys. I loved them, and believed that they loved me. Yet in one short fortnight all is changed, and through no fault or short, coming of mine. Now—' none is so poor as to show me reverence.' Every man's hand is against me ; every foot lifted to lend me a kick down-hill. That is the way of the world, and, it would seem, of the church."

"In this God-forsaken hamlet—perhaps !" rejoined Anna, snipping at the frayed edges of Bessie's flannel skirt. "Which is but a tiny scrap of the world, a mere shred of the fringe on the garment of humanity. I am thankful that something is likely to remove

you to a better place, even if it takes the form of a social earthquake. Things always pull straight after awhile. We have Scripture-warrant for that."

"If it were not for my wife and babes!" mused the poor man of God. He had enough of the pastoral cant to say, "babes" and "lambs." "But for them I should have no solicitude; would ask to-morrow for dismission from the care of a church that has requited my labors so basely. There are always fields open for the occupancy of single men."

"Ethel flew at me like an infuriated sucking-dove yesterday, when I said that all clergymen should be vowed to celibacy," remarked Anna demurely, the needle relieving the scissors. "I told her that St. Paul implied as much in wishing to have his disciples 'without carefulness,' and that he commended his own example to other apostles. If you had been ministering in the sanctuary, instead of being bidden with your wife to serve Mrs. Fitchett's tea-table, this row would not have come about. Ethel—sweet, unoffending saint! is the disturbing element—not you. She and the babies are the clogs that hinder you from shaking the dust of Freehold from your feet to-morrow. And your flock—generous Christians that they are!—are aware of your dilemma. The Roman Catholic clergy are in the right on this point."

"I am astounded to hear such sentiments from the mouth of a Protestant *woman!*" broke forth the divine, and wily Anna's end was gained.

He loved argument better than the meat that perisheth, better than rumination upon his own woes. The monstrous heresy so shamelessly enunciated

must be combated. In relating the occurence in happier days, Anna declared that, under the fusillade of authorities, illustrations, demonstration and exhortation poured upon her, she could think of nothing but—

"They sought him with thimbles, they sought him with care,
They pursued him with forks and with hope;
They threatened his life with a railway share,
They soothed him with smiles and with soap."

She stitched on serenely through the harangue, maintaining enough of unsanctified incredulity in smile and shrug to keep him up to his work. When he had talked himself breathless, and away from the dreaded "conclave," he noticed her occupation.

"You ought not to be doing that! You are wearing yourself away to—" He shut his mouth with a gasp.

"To skin and bone? True enough! But I am fond of skeletons and cuticle, you see. At present, I am only amusing myself with these odds and ends until I see whether or not Ethel awakes at twelve o'clock for her medicine. Unless she does, I am not to disturb her. You ought to be in bed, however. Hollis has come in, I suppose?"

"No. He is not in his room. Did he say where he was going to-night?"

"To see Mr. Phelps on business," dryly. "He seldom stays so late there, or anywhere else, for that matter. He may have been obliged to go to the office after his call."

"It may be that I am laying too much stress upon Mr. Phelps's aid and comfort in this unfortunate

affair," resumed the pastor, after a pause. "But it would seem that the addition of so influential a parishioner to the society might, when it is understood that I have drawn him to the church, mollify measurably the general irritation."

Anna's lips parted impulsively. then closed without a word. Let the educated slave of illiterate despots express what balm he could from the hope that the spiritual influence of wealth and position might be a tree of healing to the bitter waters beside which he was sowing in tears. The whole framework of the pastoral relation was too far out of plumb for her to rectify so much as a single beam. She sewed on buttons and tapes, relieving her feelings somewhat by jerking energetically upon each when it was fast; listening meantime, not without uneasiness, for the click of Hollis's key in the door.

The rain fell in torrents; the choked gutters gurgled and ran over in sheets and splashes; the fireless room was growing chilly. Cannel coal and birchen logs and æsthetic pine-cones were not used as fuel in the parsonage. The heating of the ugly Latrobe in the dining-room under the front parlor was postponed as late in the season as was consistent with health and comfort. Coal was dear in Freehold, and the society knew just how many tons could be made to warm the minister's house during the long, tedious winter. Anna's feet and hands were cold; the breath of her cousin-in-law showed in thin vapor, as he continued to make talk, but neither spoke of remitting the vigil till twelve o'clock struck, and still no Hollis appeared. Their glances met uneasily.

"Don't you suppose—" Anna began cheerily.

The feeble tinkle of the door-bell was an electric shock to both. Anna was upon the clergyman's heels as he drew back the bolt in agitated haste.

"Good evening, Mr. Le-e-e!" said a voice between chattering teeth.

"Mr. Phelps!" in extreme astonishment. "Walk in, sir!"

Anna could not wait for civilities.

"What has happened?" said she, eagerly, but guardedly, mindful of the sleeping patient upstairs. "Where is Hollis?"

The visitor was drenched and dripping; bare-headed, his hair streaming with rain and plastered to his head, hung about a haggard face. He was more like a drunken tramp, with his bleared eyes, faltering tongue and skulking gait than the gallant, gracious gentleman who had presented himself in the Lupton library less than four hours before.

"Hollis!" he said, hollowly. "I don't know. I haven't seen him. I—am not—well, Mr. Lee! I believe I have had—something—like a chill. Ugh!" shaking from head to foot as his host led him into the parlor. "And I had—an—idea! It is gone now"—with a weak, foolish laugh—"but there was a—matter—of some—importance—about which—I ought—I came expressly—to consult you—as a good man—and my pastor. O, yes! as my pastor, you know! Of course! of course!"

He fell to shivering anew, and passed from articulate incoherence to odd mumblings, his head drooping on his chest, his body "slumping" helplessly together

in the chair where they had put him. Mr. Lee chafed his hands, which were like soaked clay; Anna ran for brandy and hot water. Mr. Lee met her in the hall when she brought them.

"He has been drinking already!" he whispered. "His breath tells that. But he must have more, or he will be in a state of collapse. What can it mean?"

Never was sound more welcome to waiting ears than the rattling key in the lock of the door behind them. Hollis was pale and excited, muddy up to the knees, damp all over.

"I ran in to say that I may not get home again before morning!" he began, talking very fast. "Mr. Phelps went out for half an hour this evening. At eight o'clock. And has not come back. I have been walking the streets for an hour. Eh! what?" at length perceiving the frantic gestures that tried to check him.

He pressed into the parlor before them, knelt beside the palsied, crouching form, and spoke in his ringing young voice:

"Mr. Phelps! dear friend! I am so thankful to find you! They are terribly anxious about you at home. Brandy and water, hot—is it, Anna? Just the thing for you, sir! You have taken cold, and are thoroughly chilled. There! that will set you up!" as the potion was greedily swallowed. "Now, Anna, get shawls—blankets—something to wrap him up in, while I run for a carriage. We must get him home without wasting one minute!"

He had knocked up the men at a livery-stable on

the next block ; helped them get in the horses, and was back in eight minutes by the clock to which Anna's gaze turned every other second after her charge was wrapped in shawls, and a blanket was ready to throw about him when he should be put in the coach. He had not spoken distinctly since Hollis's arrival, but he did not shiver except at intervals, and, she feared, would fall asleep before they could get him off. The brothers supported him to the carriage ; the driver ceased to growl at being "drug out o' bed on sech a devilish-bad night," when he saw the limp figure, and lent active help in lifting him into the vehicle. The door was slammed, awakening sharp reverberations in the rain-washed street ; the wheels rumbled away up the hill.

Anna was left alone in a chaos of fears and conjectures. Thoughts of bed and sleep were folly. She stole up to Edith's chamber and found her still slumbering sweetly ; then, back to the parlor to wait for the brothers and news from her friends. The work-basket and pile of mended clothing on the table ; the book Mr. Lee had laid down ; a few shreds on the carpet—were tokens of their vigil and waiting. But for the blotches of wet on the floor, and muddy foot-prints here and there, and the emptied glass redolent of spirits, she might have dreamed the rest, so incongruous was it with all she had seen and heard of Richard Phelps, the flattered child of fortune, yet so generous in the distribution of her goods to others as to disarm envious Fate.

Sorrow and Salome ! The words would not fit together in the mind of the friend, whose loving admira-

tion of the bright, joyous creature was a passion. In the chill, plainly furnished room, her hearing strained for returning footsteps, she lapsed into musings—she could not have told how or why—of the May-day when Rex Lupton found them together in the balsam-grove,—the afternoon when Salome finished the sketch of "The Maiden's Hand," and her vivacious prattle filled ear and heart with music.

The reverie lasted until the step of one man on the flooded sidewalk and halting at the door prepared her to hear that Hollis had remained at the Phelps Place, while his brother sent the carriage for the family physician, and walked home.

"Mrs. Lupton was with mother and daughter—a ministering angel!" the pastor reported, feelingly. "Mr. Phelps was quite unconscious when we got him home. His wife was fearfully white, but brave and collected. She and Salome went upstairs with us. Mrs. Lupton, with characteristic delicacy, kept in the background. She met me in the hall on my way out, and we had ten minutes' talk. A most charming woman! full of sense and feeling! She stated that Mr. Phelps had a wild, unsettled look while discussing some business matters with her—an affair in which she needed legal advice—and once or twice put his hand to his forehead in pain or bewilderment. He also told her, as he was going away, that his head 'felt strange,' and that he 'had had a trying day—a very trying day!'

"Coupling this with a remark he made to his wife that his business-trip had 'taken more out of him than he knew until he put into harbor,' there remains little

doubt that return to the active duties of his profession after his long rest has been too much for nerves that probably have never been quite normal in condition since the terrible accident that nearly cost him his life and reason. Mrs. Lupton regretted, with true womanly sympathy, that her library in which the consultation took place was very warm from a soft-coal fire kindled to expel the dampness. She fears that the change to rain and cold without may have induced congestion of the lungs. The danger, she apprehends, from the fact that the seizure took the form of a chill, is pneumonia—a fearful scourge in this climate. She will stay there all night, which will be an unspeakable comfort to the afflicted family. One seldom meets with so clear a head united to so warm a heart."

"Was the business affair they discussed agitating?" asked practical Anna.

"I thought of that, but she replied promptly that it ought not to have excited him. It was a simple question of bargain and sale. She had read some papers to him in evidence of former transactions, to which he listened attentively and intelligently and promised to send her a properly worded deed of transfer in the morning. It was in this connection that he spoke of the strange feeling in his head. It is a sad, *sad* affair! Ah, well! we see that wealth and popularity do not insure man against sorrow!"

The next day, and many other morrows, brought no elucidation of the mystery. The bar-tender of a liquor saloon in one of the most disreputable quarters of the ultra-moral town came forward with the testimony that Mr. Phelps had entered his place about eleven

o'clock, wet to the skin, and hatless, and asked gruffly for a "drink to keep out the cursed cold." He knew Richard Phelps well by sight, as did everybody in Freehold, and was surprised to see him in such a plight. But it was none of his business to make remarks upon his customer's looks and behavior. He served the gentleman with brandy, and he tossed off a glassful, raw—threw down his money and walked off a little "groggy" in the knees, it seemed to him. No! he had not thought of "trying to detain him, and sending word to his friends."

"Bless your life, Mr. Lee!" Hollis being the interlocutor—"when you've been in the trade 's long 's me, 's boy 'n' man, you'll learn to hold your tongue 'n' not to be s'prised 't nothin', without it's somethin' as *isn't* shady!"

On the second day of Mr. Phelps's illness, Rex Lupton arriving at the railway station from New York was met before he had gone ten steps from the train by the ubiquitous Tom Johnston, who turned about and walked six blocks out of his way with the new-comer purposely to enjoy the effect of the latest sensation upon the fresh soil of an unprepared mind.

"You ain't heard the news!" was his ejaculation at the outset. "I want to know! Why man alive! it's in all the papers! *The Freehold Landmark* give a hull page with han'some headin's to it this mornin,' 'n *The Springfield Republican* hed a real tasty note on it alludin' t' "Richard Phelps, a prominent 'n' wealthy citterzin i' th' thrivin' town o' Freehold." *The Republican* always petternizes us a *leetle*, you know! I say it's out o' clear jealousy."

"What has happened to Mr. Phelps?" demanded Rex curtly. His features had taken on a pallor and rigidity which is the New England evidence of powerful emotion. They did not relax or flush, while he heard the distorted tale of the prominent "citterzin's" wandering through the storm, and the critical state in which he now lay.

"It's an all-fired good card for Passon Lee!" interpolated the masculine gossip. "He's come out noble on this round. He 'n' his brother stan' t'it that Phelps come t' his house o' his own will 'n' accord, but there's them what b'lieves they picked him up, wet's a drown' rat 'n' drunk 's a lord, out o' th' gutter, 'n' has boun' themselves together to hush up th' truth. Young Lee, he's a-nussin' of him b' day 'n' night; 'n' I *do* s'pose he never had a job more t' his mind, seen' he's a goin' t' marry the daughter—"

"Hi, there!" shouted Rex to a passing hack, and before Tom Johnston could gulp another—"I want t' know!" the usually imperturbable young fellow had thrown himself and valise into the carriage, and was tearing up the street.

"The Phelps Place! as fast as you can go!" was his impetuous command.

The fever that had driven the chill out of the sick man's veins ran higher than ever on this afternoon. As Mrs. Lupton had prognosticated, pneumonia was the result of the wet night's work. A Boston physician, summoned by telegraph, was in consultation with the local practitioner in the upper chamber. Salome, walking the drawing-room restlessly, was unfitted by suspenseful agony for speech or con-

nected thought. Hollis Lee stood at a window with Anna Marcy, both too much occupied in watching the figure that went back and forth between them and the end of the apartment, to keep up a pretence of conversation. Mrs. Lupton, pale and abstracted with dark rings under her eyes, lay back in an easy-chair with folded hands and half-closed eyelids. She was, in truth, fearfully anxious and keenly alive to the importance of the imperilled life to the stability of her schemes.

"If I had but insisted upon having a written protest against the marriage before he left me that night!" was the burden of her present meditations; "it would have the force of a death-bed injunction."

She was not prone to blunder, but she had made several grievous mistakes in the conduct of this intrigue. She saw them clearly, and belabored herself more severely for them than any other critic could have had the heart to do, had he seen her, now,—languid, colorless, a prey to such sympathy in her friends' distress as wears upon the spirit with the weight of a personal grief.

To begin very far back—she was short-sighted not to keep the original of the copied epistle, instead of yielding to the womanish desire of stabbing to the heart her who had made the match between Marion Bayard and Rex Lupton, and who was so insolently secure in the consciousness of her husband's fidelity and her friends' devotion. Had the plotter forecast the unlikely complication of the second betrothal and the circumstances that made it disastrous, while the

first was only distasteful, to herself, she would never have parted with her best weapon of defence. It was a stupid blunder, furthermore, since the duller-witted wife had evidently, with her high-flown, mediæval notions of generosity and honor, destroyed unread the sealed envelope deposited in Marion's drawer. Months of keenest scrutiny and tests of finest ingenuity had brought the *diplomate*, with bitter reluctance, to accept this inference. Without the slightest desire in her cool, critical soul to divert his caresses to herself, the fascinating widow never saw Richard Phelps kiss or pet his wife, and marked the answering love in the matronly face, flushing under his tenderness, that she did not experience a sense of actual injury and repress with difficulty the inclination to proclaim the truth, arraigning one as a hypocrite, the other as a dupe. She used at these times, to despise the wife almost as much as she did the husband; to sing of the latter in her heart as—

"Douglas! Douglas! tender and *un*true!"

She took whimsical pleasure, when very much wrought up, in humming the line half-articulately, in Madeline's hearing. The ways and thoughts of these large, slow natures irked her unconscionably. She had told no lie more glibly to Richard Phelps than that of her fondness for his wife.

Still—for she was many leagues short of despondency—the copy had served her purpose up to date reasonably well, and she held the restored pencilled note in Marion's handwriting—an undoubted original—to substantiate her report of the interview in which the father had pledged his word that his girl should

not marry Reginald Lupton's son. Should Mrs. Phelps be left a widow, she would surely sacrifice her daughter's present (imaginary) good for the protection of her dead husband's name. Scenes were inevitable with her—with Salome, and with Rex,—but let them come!

Isabel was not thinking so easily and clearly as was common with her—she discovered just here. Two sleepless nights and days of ceaseless anxiety had used up more cellular tissue than she could spare, and be her equable, ever-ready self. To-night she would go to bed like a selfish, sensible heathen, and recuperate her forces by great, full draughts of *bonâ fide* slumber, such as came obediently at her call. Rex was not expected home until to-morrow,—thank heaven!

The sharp rattle and scrape of wheels on the drive made the two at the window lean forward to peer out between the curtains, and Anna said, involuntarily:

"It is Mr. Lupton, Salome!"

The girl was half-way up the room in her restless promenade as the words reached her. With a low, thrilling cry, she sprang forward and met her lover in the door of the drawing-room. Forgetful of lookers-on—of maidenly reserve—of everything except that here was strength on which her fainting heart could lay hold—love, comfort, calm!—she cast herself upon his breast.

"Rex! Oh, my darling! Thank GOD you have come at last!"

He caught her in his arms and bowed his tall head to kiss her in a mute transport of fondest compassion.

With a jerk that wrenched off the fastening, Hollis tore open the two-leaved French windows, and darted through, Anna following. The boy was livid with pain and rage. He threw up his arms to warn her back, retreating to the vine-recessed end of the colonnade. As loth to witness his paroxysm of horror and disappointment as he was to be seen, Anna ran around the corner of the house, regaining the hall through the back-door, and met Mrs. Phelps at the foot of the stairs.

The lady was wan and heavy-eyed, yet, as she had been throughout the crucial period, composed in demeanor.

"I want Salome, my dear; where is she?"

Anna rested her fluttering breast against the balustrade, and tried to breathe regularly.

"She is in there, Mrs. Phelps!" with a backward wave of the hand. "Will not I do?"

"No, thank you! The doctors are still upstairs, and I cannot be spared long. I must speak to her for an instant."

The brief dialogue went on in the subdued key learned in the sick-chamber, and Mrs. Phelps passed forward to the door of the drawing-room, where she was transfixed by the sight of the group within.

Salome, still in the firm embrace of Rex's left arm, had hidden her eyes on his shoulder, trembling like a wind-tossed leaf. He, drawn up to his full height, the marble mask of his face wearing its coldest and haughtiest expression, confronted his step-mother. She, too, was on her feet, but the languid lines of

shape and visage were the same as when she had lain back in the chair; her voice was lazily insolent. She even smiled slightly in speaking.

"I doubt it, I repeat, and I shall wait for other proof than this pretty little scene—well put together as it is!"

Salome would have started away from her shelter but for the firmer hold that kept her there. The part of the cheek that was visible, with her ear and neck, was hot scarlet.

"And *I* repeat," said Rex, in accents like flint, "that this is my betrothed wife, let who will dispute it. This is extraordinary conduct, Isabel!"

"Not extra-or-di-na-ry!" with the faintest possible indication of mimicry of his somewhat precise enunciation,—"when I recollect that her father told me, not three days ago, that she should never marry you with his consent."

"I think—"

"At her mother's voice, Salome broke away and fled to her; hands outstretched and eyes dilating—

"Mamma! Mamma! can *that* be true?"

"Hush, my child! I think—" turning to the others, features and voice dignified and calm,—"there has been enough of this for the present. This is not a time for explanation or denial. Salome! come with me! You can wait in the library, Rex. I will send her to you soon."

Left to herself by the sudden intervention of acknowledged authority, Mrs. Lupton walked deliberately to the long mirror between the windows, and regarded her image attentively. At first, sedately,

then with the wide, feline smile creasing the cheeks in which the color rose gradually.

"A question of identity!" she laughed behind her teeth. "*Did* she put me down? Yet this looks like myself!"

Gathering up her wraps from the hall-table as she passed, she betook herself to her own abode, pausing on the drive for a minute's chat with Rufus Lee, who was just coming up to inquire as to the result of the medical consultation.

"You would better step into the library and wait," she said suavely. "I know this is what Mrs. Phelps would wish. You will, probably, find your brother there. He was here a minute ago. Mrs. Phelps will be down after a while. She was wishing to-day that you would call."

Without doubt or scruple the pastor tiptoed through the hall, pushed back the library door which was slightly ajar, and found himself in the presence of Mr. Rex Lupton, who, from the change in his countenance as he wheeled about to meet him, had evidently expected somebody else.

"A playful pat of the paw—that needless bit of mischief!" said our *intriguante*, wending her way to the lower level of her domain. "It would have been more complete if I could have hidden behind the door and heard them make talk until the love-smitten damsel entered. The divine will stand his ground as I advised as stupidly and more coolly than Casabianca."

Almost restored to equanimity by the appreciation of the comic aspect of the suggested situation, she did

not turn her shapely head far enough to see another couple "making talk," but out-of-doors. If she had, the spectacle of her son and Anna Marcy walking together in the rose-garden would not have diverted her cogitations from the graver matters on hand.

Hollis was late to supper that evening.

"Detained at the office!" he said, briefly, when his brother inquired if he had "come directly from the hill?"

He looked ill and cross, and ate nothing, gulping down two cups of strong tea in total silence.

"Do you watch again to-night?" inquired Mr. Lee, as consequential and pachydermatous as even the best clergymen can be sometimes.

He was not insensible to the worldly advantage of the augmenting intimacy between his family and that of the "prominent citizen," at this juncture. The service he had rendered Richard Phelps in restoring him to his family and the ensuing gratitude of wife and children were factors in the sum of his fate. His name had "got into the papers" in this flattering connection, and the Old North Hill felt a glow of reflected distinction. People spoke to him with more respect, and several disaffected parishioners had put themselves to the trouble of crossing the street to question him as to the incidents of his nocturnal adventure. Rufus Lee was a good man, and a sincere, but the clerical eye must note the trend of straws on the stream of public favor that—however other professions may presume to disregard it—signifies to the wedded divine starvation or honorable subsistence.

"No. I am not needed. I brought work home that will keep me up until midnight, and later."

He had not asked after Ethel, although Anna still sat behind the tea-tray in her stead. His brother's eye followed him to the closing door.

"Poor boy!" he sighed, but not anxiously. "He is tired out, and naturally feels great solicitude. The death of his best friend would be a crushing blow in a business point of view, as well as from a sentimental. Dr. Clymer told me, as we walked down the hill together this evening, that he regarded the chances of life and death as evenly balanced, with, to quote his own words, "a slight tilt on the wrong side." He considers Mrs. Phelps as a heroine, a model wife and true woman. She is fortunate in having Mrs. Lupton as a next-door neighbor. I wish her step-son would study urbanity in her school. His deportment to me this afternoon was peculiarly offensive,—a sort of haughty indifference very unbecoming in a young man's intercourse with one in my profession. And, in the circumstances, meeting, as we did, under the roof of a parishioner who does not hesitate to declare herself under obligations to me, and in whose family members of mine are received as intimate friends, I could not but think it in wretched taste, to say the least."

Anna hearkened and held her peace. Her cousin-in-law's perfunctoriness and continual magnifying of his office—as borne by himself—wore upon her patience at times. She made fresh tea and carried it up to Ethel with cream-toast prepared by herself, the parsonage maid-of-all-work not being strong on

dainty cookery. Her preoccupation in the task accounted to Ethel's husband for her taciturnity. The possibility most remote from his logical mind was that he *could* bore the clear-eyed damsel—or anybody else.

People take it for granted that fat people can not be romantic or heroic without making themselves ludicrous. There is really no coarsening or clouding influence in adipose tissue evenly distributed over the human frame, that we should invariably associate it with mere jollity or with dull phlegm. Yet music-lovers sigh over Campanini's growing girth, and smile when Brignoli warbles love-songs in a sweeter lark-like tenor than ever issued from thinly encased lungs ;—and Falstaff as a lover is not amusing because of the incongruity of character with that of toper, braggart and coward, but because he weighs fifteen stone.

"He is fat and scant of breath!" (and, presumably, perspiring) the queen gives as her excuse for offering her handkerchief to Hamlet. But when did Booth or Irving risk the sentence of *reductio ad absurdum* by padding "to the part"?

The girl who, as the clock struck eleven, carried to Hollis Lee's door a cup of steaming chocolate she had brewed after the servant had gone to bed, was as fine of soul, as deep of heart, as loyal and as poetic as if her beautiful hands had been able to span her waist. She moved lightly for one of her weight, and never lunged or lurched in walking. Hollis was first made aware of her approach by her knock and gentle call.

"I have brought up a little lunch for you," she said,

when he opened the door. "You must not study late unless you eat supper."

His care-lined face nearly deprived her of courage to add, after he thanked her and took the tray—

"There is something I want to tell you when you can give me five minutes. You will find me in the back parlor alone. Your brother is in his study."

Absorbed in his own affairs as he was, her manner aroused within him a sufficiently lively degree of interest in the "something" to take him downstairs as soon as the lunch was disposed of. He was fond of Anna in a way. They had been comrades for years, and he had much respect for her quick perception and sound sense. Ethel had resigned more than one dear hope during the late summer and early autumn, hopes she had never confided even to Rufus.

Anna was sewing as usual, hemming a set of table-napkins that were to surprise Ethel when she came downstairs. They were bought with Anna's own money when she descried the numerous darns in what remained of Ethel's bridal outfit of napery. Hollis did not know this, or care to observe the traces of housework in the reddening and roughening of the "Maiden's hand." The cruelest neglect women ever receive from men who *are* men, is through the selfish absorption of the latter in other women. Cataract never so deadened the vision, nor stone-deafness the ear.

This particular man ought to have appreciated the directness of his companion's approach to the subject to be laid before him.

"Gerald Lupton was hanging about Mrs. Phelps's

garden this afternoon, waiting to speak to you or me," she began. "Happening to catch sight of me on the back porch—"

"When you ran one way, I another, to get away from the lovers," put in Hollis, with a rough laugh. "Well, go on!"

She obeyed gravely and quietly, not raising her eyes from her work:

"He beckoned me out and asked if I would walk in the rose-garden with him. He was all in a quiver with nervousness—quite unstrung between the dread of, as he said 'telling tales out of school,' and keeping back what Mrs. Phelps ought to know perhaps. He is very fond of her and of Salome, but 'felt that he could talk more comfortably about it to me.' It seems that, night before last, hearing voices in the library, he stole downstairs into the parlors to peep at the visitors. His curiosity had been already excited by catching a glimpse of his mother, in a different gown from what she had worn at dinner, slipping slyly down the stairs, carrying 'a big picture,—a queer sort of affair,' he said—'with locked doors over it,' that belongs in his brother's room. He saw her over the balustrade of the third-story stairs, having been to the garret for a book he kept there. Interdicted literature, probably, but I made no comment. This incident tempted him to play the eavesdropper. The sliding-doors and the *portière* between the back parlor and the library were shut, but he pried a crack between the doors with his knife-blade, winding it with his handkerchief to prevent noise. The curtains hung a very little way apart so her could see quite well all that went on in the other room."

"That boy is educating himself for the State's prison and gallows!" remarked Hollis, sententiously severe.

"I must confess that the cool premeditation of the misdemeanor shocked me somewhat. Yet I was interested when he described how his mother, 'dressed up fit to kill, in silk and laces,' sat there reading a letter aloud to Mr. Phelps, with the open picture by her. 'It was the likeness of Rex's girl, the one who was killed on the railroad,' he said, 'and a raving beauty.' His mother was perfectly composed in face and talk, but Mr. Phelps looked pale and scared.

"I had the strength of mind to stop him there. 'It was as dishonorable in me to listen, as in him to act the spy!' I told him, and was leaving him in a passion, when the boy actually burst into tears, and begged me not to oblige him to go to Mrs. Phelps or Rex with what he was sure was at the bottom of all the trouble. If Mr. Phelps were to die he would have to tell it all in court, most likely. He hadn't slept a wink all last night—and so much more of the same wild talk, that I let him go on, convinced that while his imagination magnified the importance of the secret, there might be something in it that would cast light on the mystery.

"'Mamma was reading a letter,' he repeated. 'You know her smooth, purring way of talking—like water slipping down a hill!'"

"That's not a half-bad description!" interjected Hollis.

"So I thought. 'Well,' said he, 'she talked a

little and then read a little from the paper. It was awfully sentimental stuff—the reading was—like a love-letter in a novel. At last she got to a place where the man was begging his girl to give him six hours out of nobody knows how many half-dozen years she had to spare, and how he could take as good care of her as an angel ever could, and how Madeline would be the first to make fun of her if she didn't come up to time, or words to that effect. And before I had time to think that Madeline was Mrs. Phelps's name, too, up jumped Mr. Phelps and roared out that she must stop that, and asked her what price she put upon the stolen letter, and she stood up, too, and laughed in his face and I was afraid they were coming out of the room and would smoke me and legged it as tight as I could up to my room. By-and-by I heard Mr. Phelps's voice in the hall, and took a squint at him over the banisters. He said something about sending the papers over in the morning, and his head feeling strange, and "a trying day! a very trying day!" and walked unsteadily on his pins, to the front door, without his hat. I thought he'd be back in a minute, but he didn't show again.'"

"Mrs. Lupton reported those very words."

"Yes—but she protested that the interview was not agitating—'a simple matter of bargain and sale.' I cross-examined Gerald sharply on this point. He stuck to his story—that 'Mr. Phelps was swearing-mad, and she as cool as an iced cucumber. Only no ice can be so confoundedly cool as mamma is, when other women would go into screeching hysterics.' He insists, too, that she carried that picture back up

to Rex's room as soon as Mr. Phelps had gone. He saw her do it, and after she had looked into his room and told him it was nine o'clock and he ought to be in bed and went down again to the library, he stole across in his stocking-feet to his brother's chamber and found it on the easel in the usual place, the doors locked over the portrait."

"A queer story!" mused Hollis.

"An ugly business! If half the boy tells is true, his mother has lied infamously. I am very uneasy and want somebody to share the responsibility. Will you tell Mrs. Phelps or Salome? Or shall I?"

It hurt her more than he could have guessed to see the sharp shiver that ran through him at the question. It seemed but just to her steady mind that the chance of doing either of them a service should be offered him first.

A sullen anger clouded his handsome face.

"I'll not mix myself up in the matter!" he growled. "As likely as not it is all a fabrication of the boy's, and we should get ourselves into a mess repeating it. I am sick to death of secrets and plots!"

He strode about the rooms, like a moody bear in a cage, finally stopped at her table; spoke hard and doggedly:

"That picture would seem to show that that—man—was somehow mixed up in the quarrel—if there was any quarrel. I have dropped pretty low down in the scale of manhood in the past few hours. But I haven't got to the depth of mean-spiritedness that would make me offer myself to him as a go-between from his first to his last love. If he needed me. And

he doesn't! He'll get the cream of life without my acting as skimmer!" flung out the tortured fellow, in a spasm of pain. "Use your own discretion, Anna! I have none to-night. Give a man time to pick himself up, won't you!" with a sorry attempt at self-ridicule.

He returned to his room, where there were no roses to-night, and being only twenty-three years old, laid his miserable head down upon the law-papers he had not touched all the evening, and cried as he had when he got his father's letter saying that his mother was dead, and he "must bear the will of Providence with meek resignation."

Anna, twenty-one years of age, and tender-hearted, had her cry, too, all alone. Then, she quilted her needle neatly in the hem of a napkin, and folding it up, put aside her work-basket for her writing-desk. Before she slept, she wrote out for Mrs. Phelps, in detail, the story she had told Hollis.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HE was swimming for his life in a swift channel that bore him down! down! away from the wife who stood on one shore of the narrow stream, sometimes so near that he almost grasped her outstretched hands. On the other bank hovered SOMETHING—black, formless, and grisly, which likewise followed the stream, and ever and anon reached out for him. Strangling, panting, struggling, he thus floated and fought, helpless to reach the one and chide the other, until, in a last agony, he sank into blank nothingness, with a last wild call on his wife's name.

Then, he lay on his back in the middle of a burning desert, pinioned hands and feet, the unwinking sun staring down upon him. Coppery exhalations shimmered on the horizon, and flickered upward from the red sands; his head was bursting and his tongue baked with the cruel heat. Shrill, teasing bells rang incessantly in his ears; he glowed and ached, as with a fire in his bones; every pore had its pain. Only his head was free to move, and, rolling it from side to side, he could watch the approach, on one hand, of the white-robed figure with succoring arms held toward him, the light of a great love and pity in her face,—and on the other, the steady swoop of the horrid shape that might outstrip the angel feet.

Again, he was bound, Prometheus-like, to a rock in

mid-ocean. The freezing waves glazed his limbs with ice; the boom of the surge deafened him; the tide was rising higher and higher, and, moving toward him from opposite directions were the two figures,—one, all mercy, the other all despair,—and his paralyzed throat would not give forth the scream that would, he knew, hurry her to his salvation.

Then,—and this terror occurred oftenest of all,—he was falling! falling! falling! down an abyss. With the swiftness of light, the two winged forms sped downward after him, and the frenzied horror of his calculations as to which would grasp him first swallowed up the dread of striking the unknown bottom of the chasm.

They were always in sight, always contending, as Michael the archangel and Satan for the Great Prophet's body—for the possession of his pain-racked frame and for the soul crucified with bitterer anguish.

Sometimes she offered him water, a cool, sparkling draught that caught the reflection of her face—and the grinning, grisly fiend struck down the cup and substituted scalding poison.

He spoke but one word in the ten days during which his wife watched by his pillows on one side, and death on the other. Sometimes the lips only made the syllables the parched tongue could not sound; sometimes he whispered it; sometimes, screamed it shrilly and hysterically, as might a panic-stricken woman:

"Madeline! Madeline! Madeline!"

She was ever within call. Even while not recognizing her, and praying that she would come, he would

take his medicine and nourishment from no other hand. Her voice of command restrained the frantic efforts to escape from tide, from fire, from poison,—continually from the black, formless THING even she could not drive away.

Paul, Hollis, Rufus Lee or Rex Lupton was at hand, by day and by night. Dislike and jealousy stood aloof in the awful precincts of the arena where life and death strove for mastery. Except in one brief interview between mother and son, shortly after the recall of the latter, in which Salome's betrothal was mentioned as a settled matter, and he was too much engrossed by thoughts of his father's peril to offer more than a passing exclamation of surprise—the subject had not been discussed with any one. The secret rested with the few to whom it had been already intentionally or accidentally communicated.

The surge of town-gossip, affluent, confluent, and refluent, dashed, hissed and foamed against the great house, unheeded by the inmates. The master's condition; the speculations as to how the widow and children would be "left," and what would be their future residence, with the thousand side-issues branching off from the trunk-lines of conjecture—fairly drove the Lee-Fitchett imbroglio out of sight and mind.

Anna Marcy, sometimes, and yet more frequently the indomitable next-door neighbor, received visitors and answered inquiries below-stairs. It is superfluous to add that the last-named personage was the more popular with callers and inquirers. She imparted desired information as if grateful for the solicitude

manifested for her suffering friends; she divined intuitively what details people were dying to collect yet were ashamed to ask for outright. They left her and the smitten home, full of interesting news, and eager to give it circulation as "official intelligence." That she was at less pains to gratify them than if she had been a compiler, instead of the author of what she communicated, never crossed their shrewdly-simple minds. The sick man's ravings of business, travel and friends; his frequent mention of Freehold names and localities; the tireless zeal of the Lee brothers, and Mrs. Phelps's asseverations that, but for them, especially for the filial support of that "noble Hollis," she could never have borne up at all; Paul's devotion and Salome's utter prostration of spirits,—were canvassed as animatedly all over the town and suburbs as was the suspicious circumstance that her step-son's name was pointedly avoided by the amiable and discreet matron. From all that Freehold could discover by the help of this ingenuous creature—"so pleasant and free-spoken that one couldn't believe she belonged to the same family as that high-and-mighty stick,"—and by aid of the Fitchett opera-glass,—Rex Lupton went regularly to his business every day, at the usual hour, and was in nowise moved by the troubles of his father's old friends. Even the wary step-mother surmised, rather than knew, that he did not sleep for a single night in his room all through that terrible season of suspense; that, when he disappeared immediately after the dinner over which he said little, and that in the coldest, briefest fashion, it was to go into the Phelps's back door, and not to emerge

from the house until the gray of the autumnal dawn.

The secrecy and reserve maintained by him and the family of his betrothed were ominous. She had not once chanced to see Salome and himself together since the moment of his return from New York, but she felt assured that they were in regular communication and did not delude herself with the hope that they, or the mother who met her with grave courtesy day after day, had forgotten one word uttered on that afternoon of surprised discovery.

Whether Richard Phelps lived or died, her last fight for the accomplishment of her unrelinquished purpose was to be a duel, and with his wife. Without making the error of underrating her antagonist's skill, she felt herself justified in counting upon her ability to administer a *coup de grace*, within two minutes after the fencing should begin. With no heart of her own to speak of, she was well-posted as to the anatomy of the organ, and believed that she had mapped out that of her opponent so skilfully as to make no wild strokes in feeling for the vital part. Rex's implacable temper toward herself pleased, not wounded her. It was an earnest that he would neither forgive nor forget that double treachery of which she—the machinator—held the proofs.

While biding her time she was in training for the encounter, went to bed seasonably, ate reasonably, and did not neglect the out-door exercise necessary to keep nerves and brain in health.

On the eleventh day the fever gradually subsided. On the twelfth, temperature and pulse were normal.

On the fifteenth, the patient was pronounced to be out of immediate danger. One bland October day, four weeks after the afternoon passed with Mrs. Fitchett in the parlor-car, he was removed, partially dressed, from the bed to the lounge in his dressing-room, and called upon by his wife to admire the matchless garniture of the elms and maples of the lawn and town, with the softened coloring of the hills beyond.

"Comparing the greater with the less, the hillside on your left reminds me of my best India shawl," she said playfully.

He smiled, pressed her hand to lips that quivered, and, holding it against the thin cheek, lay, looking out upon the tranquil landscape until a warm mist flowed up between it and his eyes.

The sweet dreamy silence was ended by James's entrance with a card.

"Mrs. Lupton is in the drawing-room, ma'am."

He almost smiled in presenting the salver, so unusual was the formality of the engraved pasteboard.

"Say that I will be down in a few moments, James. And do you stay in the next room, and listen for Mr. Phelps's bell."

It was in evidence of their appreciation of the visitor's love of dramatic effect that neither husband nor wife was surprised at the stately preface to the momentous interview. Hers was not a friendly call. She intended that they should comprehend this, and they did.

"Should you want anything, ring for him," con-

tinued Mrs. Phelps calmly. "Salome has gone to ride."

"With Rex Lupton?"

She had not meant to tell him, but she would not descend to evasion.

"Yes," she said, simply. "Try and sleep when you are tired of looking at the view."

He clutched a fold of her gown; pulled her down to him. The hollow, sad eyes gazed imploringly into hers.

"Darling!" he said, brokenly and feebly. "Promise that you will not let that woman teach you to hate me!"

She did not seem disturbed by the adjuration, although he did not think that strange then, or until long afterward.

"Nobody could do *that*, Richard!" she answered gently, putting back the hair from his sunken temples. "You should not fear it by now!"

"I should not! But I do! I am—I always have been utterly unworthy of you, my angel-wife! But you *are* my wife, dear,—and however circumstantial evidence may press you to the opposite conclusion, I do love you with all my heart, soul and strength. I live but in your smile. Your frown would kill me!"

"You are excited, dear husband!" yet more gently. "I do not like to leave you. I will send word to Mrs. Lupton that I cannot see her to-day."

The relaxation of inexpressible relief came into his face. Like other facile, ease-loving natures he caught at the postponement of pain he knew to be inevitable, as a boon of price.

"Would you really be willing to put her off?" gratefully. "I shall be stronger to-morrow, or next day. Better able to bear whatever may come."

With an impassive countenance she summoned James and sent her message, at the same time dismissing him from duty.

"Mrs. Phelps regrets very much, ma'am, that in consequence of Miss Phelps having gone to ride, it is impossible for her to see any one this afternoon. She hopes you will excuse her from coming down," was the message carried to the drawing-room.

"Certainly, James! I am glad she did not inconvenience herself for me. I can call again, to-morrow," in tones as dulcet as banana-cream. "I will just step into the library for a magazine Miss Salome promised me. Don't wait, James!"

In less than three minutes after James had taken her order, Mrs. Phelps said, "Come in!" to a tap on the dressing-room door, and enter Mrs. Lupton, in correct visiting costume, hat and gloves on, and an envelope in her hand.

Richard groaned an exclamation. His wife, arising dignifiedly, stood so as to screen him from the smiling intruder.

"Mrs. Lupton! there has been some mistake! I told James to say—"

"Exactly what he did, my dear, I doubt not. James is unimpeachable, always. But, having already learned from him how comfortable Mr. Phelps is to-day, I thought it best not to defer what has already been too long neglected. I am charmed to see you looking so much like yourself, Mr. Phelps. What I

have to say is no news to him, as he will testify, Mrs. Phelps. We talked the matter over *pro* and *con*, exhaustively, as one may say, the night he was taken ill, and agreed to refer it to you."

"I must insist—" Mrs. Phelps had not resumed her seat, although her visitor had settled herself at ease in a lounging chair. "I must insist—" advancing as she spoke—"that you say what you wish to me in the next room. My husband is extremely weak—"

A low laugh rippled through the room; Isabel looked up, the brown, velvet eyes radiantly saucy. She did not offer to stir.

"He always was, my dear! I beg your pardon!" still laughing; "but your unexpected confession is so charmingly naïve! It clears the way—breaks the ground for me—does away with the need of preamble and all that, you know. Indeed, my sweet friend, it is not worth while for me to go to the trouble of exchanging this delightful chair for another when I have so short a time to stay. And, I have no secrets with a wife from a husband, nor *vice versa*, as he can tell you. It is my forte—one of them—to be business-like. Have the goodness, please, to glance over this document, which, I am willing 'to take my Alfred David,' as Rogue Riderhood, or Mrs. Malaprop Fitchett would say, is a *teste* copy of one received by Miss Marion Bayard from Mr. Richard Phelps, the evening before she left home for her Albany journey. This," offering a smaller paper, "is a copy of her reply to the same."

In the speechless anguish of this, the supreme moment of his life, Richard's gaze rested only on his

wife. All other senses were merged in that one long passionate farewell. He had had his last love-look, his last smile,—perhaps the last sentence he would ever hear from her whom he had wronged, deceived, outraged,—yet beside whom all other women were at this instant as paper puppets in his sight. From the horrible heart-swoon he felt stealing over him, he prayed that he might never revive—that he might die, then and there, with her last kiss yet warm upon his lips.

All this he felt, not thought, in one lightning-flash of conscious misery, before he saw the composed features change. A scornful smile spread from the eyes downward to the firm mouth; her voice, clear and cold, told of exhaustless reserves of will-power.

"I am willing to believe that you do not understand what you ask of me, Mrs. Lupton. It is true, that as my friend's executrix, and so appointed by the will found in her desk, dated a year before her death, I have a right to examine her papers. But I decline to read what purport to be copies of such, without inquiring further into the circumstances that placed them in your hands. How did you come by these, and how long have you kept them to yourself?"

The intriguante had expected fight, and was not abashed. Her bridges were burned behind her, the river crossed. She had nothing to lose.

"I took the original of *this* from the pocket of Marion Bayard's half-burned gown. Of *this*—from the waste-paper basket into which Mr. Phelps had crammed it, after tearing it into small pieces."

"While the writer lay dead in the house, I suppose?"

"I am not ashamed to own it."

"I hardly expected that you would be!" The scornful light was imperial, now. The grandly-poised head, the dilated nostrils, the curves of mouth and brows were the mien of a disdainful goddess. "Knowing, as I do, the quickness of your perceptions, I had a right, however, to expect that you should know me better than to imagine that, in the examination of an affair so serious as you imply this to be, I would be put off with what may be forgeries — *especially* after you have owned by what means you obtained them. The motive that urged you to purloin and copy a letter in the circumstances indicated would, if need were, carry you further and instigate the composition of whatever you wished to have me believe. Here is my ultimatum.—I will not so much as touch those papers! When you produce the originals, I will read them in the hearing of any witnesses whom you may select. Allow me to repeat the suggestion that Mr. Phelps is altogether unfit to listen to agitating talk. We will walk into the other room, if you please."

Mrs. Lupton sat perfectly still, without a symptom of discomfiture.

"Mr. Phelps cannot deny the authenticity of my proofs of the relations that existed between him and Miss Bayard up to the moment of her death," she said, facing him. "If he can, let him speak!"

His wife's hand was over his mouth in a second.

"Not one word, Richard! you shall not be hum-

bled by submission to a test so degrading to you and to me! Have you no humanity, Mrs. Lupton? Cannot you see that you are endangering his life by bringing this wretched business into his sick-room? What motive have you for persecuting him? As his wife—as his nurse—I will not permit it! I beg—I *command* you to leave the room! Bring your original documents to me downstairs with two—ten—twenty witnesses if you will, including your step-son and my daughter, and read them aloud, or have them read to us. Will you go, now?"

She was kneeling by the half-conscious man, her arm under his head, vinaigrette in hand; as she spoke she rang a hand-bell violently.

The other woman sat motionless, while James ran into the room, and, in obedience to his mistress's directions, poured out a restorative. Motionless—but busy with thought—unholy fires filling eyes that lost not an incident of the scene. When the servant was dismissed, and the fainting victim began to breathe naturally, the rich, *trainante* accents again reached him:

"I begin to see daylight through the dust and smoke! I spoke to you, some weeks after Miss Bayard's death, of a sealed envelope left, with other effects of hers, in a locked drawer in the south room. I challenge you to deny that you opened it and read the contents before destroying them. If—" with keener scrutiny—"you ever *did* destroy them!"

The wife still supported her husband's head. She did not remove her eyes from his,—large and piteous as those of one who is slowly drowning. The breath

fluttered and intermitted between his faded lips. Unable to articulate, he threw wretchedness, pleading, adoration into the gaze that clung to her as the only hope in earth or heaven. Seeming not to heed the last query, she smiled down at him, a gleam of loving compassion that quickened the weak action of the heart. Her disengaged hand lifted his dampened hair. She did not believe the horror yet!

"I per-ceive!" said Mrs. Lupton, laughing and rising. "Thank you for the key to behavior otherwise inexplicable. Mr. Phelps! I lied in telling you that the original of your letter was in my safe-keeping. Your wife had it—and read it! My errand—or the part of it which pertained to her—was useless. I am more than satisfied."

"*Madeline!*"

He shook as in the death-ague. Such extremity of terror as she had never conceived of rushed into the eyes she held with hers; a greenish pallor overspread his visage; his thin fingers fastened on her sleeve; his lips writhed, giving forth no sound. She smiled still, and continued to thread his hair with mesmeric finger-tips. In answering what his tormentor had said, her thoughts appeared to be divided by solicitude for her patient's physical case. If the semi-abstraction were feigned, the acting was perfect.

"If you refer to anything contained in the envelope you told me was in the south-room drawer, Mrs. Lupton—I can say that I found it there when we came back to Freehold last summer. There was so much to be attended to when we were getting ready to go abroad that much was overlooked. The envelope lay

in the locked drawer all the time we were away. I found it, one day—and burned it."

"Unopened?" sarcastically incredulous.

Mrs. Phelps returned the insolence with a level look—a lurking intonation of surprise in her reply:

"I burned the packet without breaking the seal. What could it matter after so many years?"

"And unread?"

"Unopened and unread!" A flash of haughty impatience cast back the persistent impertinence. "I deny your right to catechize me, but if reply will shorten this scene, you shall have it again. I burned the sealed envelope and contents just as I found them."

"*Had you never read that letter?*"

One swift glance at the face on her arm, and she laid it tenderly on the pillow. She stood up, as pale as he; her eyes were black and deep with anger.

"Do you take me to be one like yourself? What more explicit answer can I give? What concern is this of yours? This passes the bounds of decency and patience!"

"It is so much my affair that I do not leave this room until I have a categorical reply to my question. Did you *never* read the contents of that envelope?"

"*Never!* Now—will you go?"

The two women confronted one another for an instant; neither quailing, while she seemed to take the measure of the other's strength. Then, with audacious ease, and her most feline smile, the younger swept hostess and host a profound courtesy and left them to themselves.

"GOD forgive me!"

The stifled cry recalled Richard's shattered wits. Trying to raise himself on his elbow, he saw that his wife had fallen on her knees by a chair, her forehead on her palms, shivering and moaning in a wild, lost sort of way, utterly unlike herself. Greatly alarmed, he called her twice before she heard him. When, at last, she sprang up and came hastily toward his sofa, she was trying to smile—surely the bravest, strangest smile ever seen on martyr's face!

"Don't mind me!" she said catching breath between the syllables. "I seldom get very angry. I don't think I have lost my temper in twenty years as completely as I did just now. But I had provocation—hadn't I? We will say no more about it. You must rest, and it is time for your beef-tea. No! no!" her palm again upon his mouth. "I will not let you talk! What good would it do? *You* couldn't get out of the room if I were to order you to go!" laughing nervously. "I never thought I should ever be capable—or guilty—of the rudeness of turning a guest out-of-doors!"

She rang for the beef-tea; measured and added the wine advised by the doctor, and gave it with an unswerving hand; drew a screen between the exhausted invalid and the window, and, taking a book, seemed to read until he fell asleep.

Satisfied of this, she let the volume sink to her knee, while she watched the lower street and gate, afraid to yield to the sway of thought and reminiscence until the rest of the trial was over. Without having heard the threat of exposure made to her

husband, she apprehended fully what Isabel's next step would be, and what was the prospect of partial success with one of Rex Lupton's inflexible ideas of right and honor. It was beyond the power of created thing to alienate him from Salome, or to forfeit the mother her place in his loyal heart. But his step-mother could and would render him intensely miserable. She might raise a ferment of horror and grief and righteous indignation within him that would make his marriage with Richard Phelps's daughter virtual separation from her home and parents. He could never again join friendly hands with the man who had done this thing. She must see him before he met the foiled schemer, and test his faith in herself to the utmost,—ask of him what few men would be willing to grant,—blind and ignorant obedience to what might sound like a reasonless behest.

This done, she might get her out of sight for a little while; might trust herself to look fairly at the stain she had set in her soul.

For this was what it was. For the first time within her recollection, she been guilty of a downright lie;—"perjury," she named it, with a cold, sick shudder; then lashed back memory and conscience, that strength might be left for the interview with him who, as youth and man, had believed in and loved her as a son his very own mother.

Richard sighed in his sleep,—a sobbing breath that brought her to his side. He was terribly prostrated by the exciting scene he had passed through. A relapse might be the result. Leaning on the screen, she regarded him fixedly, yearning heart and saddened

soul in her strained gaze. Until now, she had reckoned as the most direful epoch in her life—not second to that great horror of darkness in which she had become the innocent spy upon her husband's correspondence with her bosom-friend—the night when Richard had called Heaven to witness that he had always been true to her in thought, word and deed. Weak she had known him to be prior to that time—wickedly weak—a slave to impulse, and prone to see things as he would have them appear, rather than as they were, but not a man who would volunteer a falsehood, and take his solemn oath that it was truth.

It is a sentimental fallacy that love cannot exist apart from respect. Of the twain, love is the more robust and lives on divorced or widowed, in isolation that may not be resigned, much less contented, yet which is to all appearance hale existence.

Wifely respect, the glad homage of her upright soul to her husband, as her superior in moral and mental strength,—died and had dishonorable burial, one mockingly-bright August noon, six years agone, when, leaving her convalescing husband asleep in Salome's charge, she summoned courage, without speaking of it to any one, to look over and put away the effects Marion had commended in writing to her, "should she survive me." The first sentence her eye lighted upon, on drawing the paper from the envelope, told her the worst. She had read all, each word branding itself upon her memory forever; then, as she had truly stated, locked away a sealed envelope in the drawer as in a shameful grave, and left it there,

as she believed, to be seen no more by human eye while she and Richard Phelps both lived.

Love had made wifely duty more tolerable in one way than if he had become odious to her with the knowledge of his faithlessness. In another sense, it had made the cross sharper. Mrs. Lupton would have sneered exultingly had she surmised how often the wife's heart had cried—not sung—the travesty of the mournful old song,—a travesty Isabel took credit to herself for inventing—"Tender and untrue!" In her anguish of love at which reason should have blushed, she had sometimes thought the bitter-sad satire should be inscribed upon her chivalrous, winsome husband's tombstone.

This hour she knew a deeper depth of degradation, —even the lowering of herself to shield him. The salvation of his fair fame—the shadow worshipped by him—the protection of her children from befouling scandal; Salome's happiness; the unspeakable dread of seeing her husband die under the scourge of detection,—by so much more fearful to characters like his than awakened conscience, as they love themselves more than others,—all these things started up before her, in the one instant of recoil from actual and conscious falsehood, and hurled her forward. She had cried to an offended GOD for forgiveness. HE knew the might of the temptation, and, being all-merciful, might assoil her soul. The blot would be forevermore visible to her. It was a Pyrrhian victory with disasters never to be retrieved.

Let him who has not been tried beyond his strength; for whom expediency has never suddenly usurped

the place of necessity, forbear to judge this woman. Her love was of a temper so divine that it withstood the fires of the furnace heated seventy times seven; so pure, that it gathered no base elements from contact with perfidy; so strong, that it triumphed over all possible rivals. I, who stand with bowed head in her presence, wordless, when I seek for terms that may fitly convey my reverence and wonder, frankly own, with her pious critics, that the thing for which she risked her soul and bartered peace of conscience, was not worth a tithe of the price paid for it. The love of a man like Richard Phelps was not to our cool, perspective view fit for her having or holding. We heard it said long ago, that her character was laid out in grand, simple lines. Her steadfastness to her marriage vow, the literal reading of the obligation to render *love*, honor and duty until the wedded ones were parted by death, her silence on the rack, her tender assiduity of care, the brave front turned to her world, were the outcome of this nature and the few staunch principles she had learned in all humility and singleness of heart. Combined, they made up for her—WIFEHOOD.

Slow, scalding drops trickled down her cheeks as she bent toward her sleeping husband.

"And I sat in judgment upon *your* sin, my poor, weak, tempted, *unrepentant* dear!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE Oriental garb of the riverside hills was suffused with a roseate glow, as Salome and Rex, cantering up the drive on their return from their ride, saw Mrs. Phelps standing on the piazza, evidently expectant.

"How is papa?" asked Salome, before she touched the earth.

"Sleeping quietly. Look into his room when you have taken off your habit and see if he wants anything. Rex! may I speak to you for a moment?"

He followed her into the library with the light, peculiarly springy step which his step-mother was wont to describe as "the only action he had that was less than fifty years old." He looked happy, well and nervously expectant.

"I was about to crave an interview on my own account," he said, "but, *place aux dames!* I am at your service."

The smile common acquaintances rarely saw lent sweetness to the mouth and softness to the eyes. Exercise had tinted the clearly-cut pale face healthfully; the gentle deference of tone and demeanor was graceful and becoming. As he spoke, he laid his ungloved hand on one of hers as it rested on the sofa-arm. He was very fond of her; inexpressibly grateful in anticipation of their nearer relationship. Nobody else had

"mothered" him since his childhood. She hardly ventured a second look as all this occurred to her; began her communication without preamble—obliging herself to speak evenly and without obvious emotion:

"Mrs. Lupton has been here this afternoon, and insisted upon seeing me in Richard's room. The interview was agitating, but we will not speak of that. I trust the effect upon him will be nothing worse than temporary fatigue. She will ask you, probably, almost certainly,—to read some papers copied, she says, from letters written a little while before Marion's death. One was addressed to Marion, the other—a mere note—is her reply. I do not wish you to see them. I know it all, and so does my husband. If the letters are genuine, respect for the dead and mercy to the living require that they should be suppressed and destroyed. If they are forgeries—so much the worse for the exhibitor. It is asking a great deal of you to require a blind pledge, but I think you may trust me where your peace of mind is concerned. Let the dead past bury its head. No good can come of raking in cold ashes. Don't look at those papers, Rex! Refuse to glance at them. Mrs. Lupton obtained them dishonorably, and it is cruelly wrong to show them to you or to any one! If she gives them to you, burn them without reading one line."

The hard, cold look she knew well set his visage.

"It is infamous!" he said judicially. "Isabel has disappointed me in many ways lately, but this passes belief. Her objections to my marriage are in some measure natural, since she no doubt imagines it to be opposed to her interest and those of the children.

She ought to understand, however, that nothing would induce me to read—with knowledge of their character—such papers as you describe. Thank you for putting me on my guard. And—" winning accent and smile returning—" still more, for the interest in my happiness that prompted the act. Isabel shall tell me nothing that I do not choose to hear. I promise faithfully not to read a line or listen to a syllable. Does this set your mind at rest—motherlie ? "

She dropped her head upon his hand with a choking sob.

" How he trusts me ! " was her shamed thought. " Would this stainless gentleman, without fear and without reproach, who takes my mere assertion as he would another's oath and pledges his word on the strength of it, shrink from me if he knew all ? GOD might pardon me, but would *he ?* "

He felt a hot tear on his fingers before she raised herself, but her smile was grateful and replete with tender humility that touched him to the quick.

" My dear son ! " she said. " My noble, true boy ! May you never know what a weight you have taken from my soul ! There are some things it is not good or safe to think of when one can keep his thoughts away from them. Now "—laying her hand on her chest and drawing a long sigh, as if parting with the burden—" what can I do for you ? "

" Your petition was so small and mine is so great that I feel ashamed to speak of my promise as an equivalent for what I would have you say."

Mrs. Lupton was in the library when her husband's son came home that night. The cannel-coal fire was

lighted at sunset every evening now, and the silver-gray tea-gown had made way for one of fine black cloth, tailor-made, that fitted without a crease. The amber plush portière reflected fire and gas-glow in long, sheeny lances ; the white fringe of a Japanese chrysanthemum fitfully flushed with pink opened full in the warmth and glare ; the oak coppice screen with the silver-and-gray swallows flying across it, fenced in the reader's chair from the breezy oriel.

She laid by her book—by the way, it was that crystal-pure idyl, Julianna Ewing's "Story of a Short Life," which she had begun aloud to the children after dinner and become too much interested to put aside—and smiled a cordial welcome to the visitor.

"This is an unusual pleasure ! I was thinking just now how little we have seen of one another lately. I hope you are going to smoke your night-cap cigar over my fire ?"

"Thank you ! Not to-night ?" civilly defensive. "No !" as she motioned toward a chair. "You are very kind, but I do not care to sit down."

He did not even stand on the rug with his back to the fire—an easy attitude that would have given her a "purchase" on him. He stopped in front of her, less than five feet off, obliging her to strain her neck backward to see his face ; clasped his hands behind him and stood, if not at bay, icily-unapproachable by aught save direct and determined advance.

"I looked in to tell you that I am to be married the first of November. The physicians have ordered Mr. Phelps to Florida and Mrs. Phelps will go with him. We—Salome and I—will take their house during

their absence. The ceremony will be very private, of course, in the present state of Mr. Phelps's health, only our immediate relatives being present."

There he paused. As much of the story was told as he chose to give.

The auditor's musing eyes went from his chiselled, impassive countenance to the fiery grate, then back again. Her delicate brows were puckered interrogatively.

"This is—ah—unexpected!" without a break in the legato ripple. "Because—as you did not—or, rather as Mrs. Phelps did not allow me to state on the afternoon when you announced your new engagement—Mr. Phelps had assured me vehemently that the marriage should never take place; that his daughter was as good as engaged to young Lee. He did not talk like a delirious man, and I supposed, you know, that he spoke—by—the card!"

"It is all settled definitely. There was never any foundation for the rumored engagement to Mr. Hollis Lee. It was right that you should be notified as to our arrangements, without delay. Good-night!"

"Don't go, Rex!" a hurt tremble in the accent. "I do wish you great happiness in your new relations. Salome is a lovely child, thoroughly amiable and sunny-hearted. With hardly her mother's peculiar force of character, perhaps, but you have enough for both. You would not suffer the curb-matrimonial as meekly as Mr. Phelps does.

"One minute, please!" for his hand was on the door. "I may tell the children—mayn't I? Gerald will be charmed—and astonished. He was so sure

that Hollis Lee was the happy man. The little witch! how cleverly she has outwitted everybody, including the poor Lees! Ah, well! I was a flirt myself until I settled down for life with a respectable mill-owner, ever and ever so much my senior. I don't mean to flatter you," frankly affectionate, "but our impulsive girl is doing a more sensible thing than I expected from one of her romantic turn of mind. Her mother is the cleverest woman I know. And I am more gratified than I dare to tell you, Rex, dear,"—becoming gravely-maternal—"that you have let the old dream go for what it was worth, and opened your eyes to see life as it is. Few first loves are judicious."

He was thoroughly uncomfortable when she let him go—as she intended he should be. He ground his teeth, in mounting the stairs, to take their edge off, as it were. Yet his distrust of his step-mother was not yet confirmed disbelief. His chamber was cheerful with the play of a wood-fire on the hearth; his gas burning half-high; his slippers and smoking-jacket were on an easy-chair wheeled up to the fender-stool. Isabel had her quirks and her follies, but she had always ministered faithfully to his physical needs, and made this house a home for him as far as she could. It was the fault of her temperament that they were not congenial associates. He wished he had been less curt in announcing his plans, and had not refused to smoke downstairs.

Yet, after donning velvet jacket and slippers, he sat down, and lighting his cigar, leaned back to watch the fire and dream of Salome and their real home.

Not until the weed was half consumed, did he observe an envelope on the table at his elbow. It was sealed and addressed to him, in a "back-hand" he did not recognize. Without a thought of Mrs. Phelps's warning, so far afield had his musings wandered, he opened it and drew out a letter written on thick business paper, and several pages in length. From within it, a half-sheet, folded once, slipped to the floor. This he picked up and unfolded. Upon it was pasted a smaller sheet of note-paper that had been torn and then fitted together. There were three lines of penciled writing, but so blurred by crosses and joins that the cursory glance he cast upon it did not decipher a single word. Laying it aside, he turned to the letter for explanation. The chirography was bold and clerkly and might be that of a merchant's or lawyer's secretary. He did not think of Isabel, who wrote two or three hands, bearing only a family resemblance to each other.

"*In the Library. Nine o'clock P. M.*

"MY OWN LOVE — You say in your letter (burned as soon as I had committed the contents to memory) that I must never call you *that* again. There is a higher law than that of man's appointment, binding our hearts together, stronger even than that of your sweet, wise lips. Until you are actually married to the man whom you confess you do not love, you will, according to that divine law, be my own, Marion—"

With a violent start, the young man shook the sheet from his fingers, as he would a serpent.

This was what he had promised not to read, or so much as to touch! The veins stood out high and dark on his forehead; he drew in the air hissingly. Had a basilisk uncoiled from his bosom and thrust a forked tongue in his face, the shock would not have been greater. This was "the letter written to Marion!" He had thrown away six of the best years of his life upon the woman whom another man called his "own love"; the man to whom she had confessed that she did not love her betrothed husband! Who was he?

The letter had fallen with the first page uppermost. From where he stood, he could read what he had at first overlooked, and what would have put him on guard at once had he noticed it; "*Authentic Copy*" was written on the upper left-hand corner. The words dispelled doubt.

"If they are genuine, respect for the dead, and mercy to the living require that they should be suppressed and destroyed," Mrs. Phelps had said of "papers written *a little while* before Marion's death." His word was pledged. But what name would he see if he reversed the sheet before destroying it? With a bound of the heart that would have assured him, had proof been needed, what his bonnie, living girl-love was to him, he put away all tender memories of the dead, false betrothed. He had worshipped and mourned the thinnest of shadows. He might owe respect—abstractly—to the dumb dead, but no reverence to a wild dream from which he had awakened. Who was the "living" to whom he was entreated to show mercy? Where was the man who had first

robbed him, then let him play the sad-visaged dupe and fool, while the hey-day of youth slipped forever beyond his reach?

To learn that—to remember the name with execration—to despise, with the full force of a wronged and honest soul—perhaps, to brand him as cur and blackguard, should he ever cross his path—would not be to break his word. Was it not his right—the poor rag of compensation he might claim for the incalculable, the damnable evil the traitor had wrought? He would confess it to Salome's mother to-morrow—but this one thing he *would* do!

He stooped for the letter.

"Peace! let him rest! GOD knoweth best!
And the flowing tide comes in!
And the flowing tide comes in!"

It was only his beloved step-mother on her nightly round of nursery and Gerald's chamber, singing to her guileless self in passing her step-son's door to prove her serenity of spirit; but Rex staggered back into his seat, put his elbows on his knees, and covered his face with his hands.

He smelled the balsam-boughs slanting to the water; the trailing arbutus Salome wore in her belt, heard the waves lapping the prow and sides of the bounding boat. GOD'S glorious heaven was over them, and the sun was rising, after a long, long night, in his heart. The fresh, tender young voice told the tale of love and loss and patient submission.

"Peace! let him rest! GOD knoweth best!"

Mrs. Lupton's chamber-door closed upon the rest of the refrain.

Aye! and could not he—affluent in heaven's best blessings, loving and beloved by the noble, true daughter of the Christian heroine who expected her "son" to stand fast by his plighted word,—the almost husband of a pure, high-souled woman,—afford to spare the miserable wretch whose own mind and memory must be a continual hell?

He pitied—he almost forgave him, as he took up the sheets from the floor, the scrap of paper from the table, and averting his eyes lest the signature might leap out at him from the twisting flame, laid them under the forestick, and did not look that way again until nothing was left of them but tinder and ashes.

THE END.

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